Religious Community Involvement in Adolescence: The Profundity of Lived Religion for Teens

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Abstract

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The present study investigates the contribution of religious community involvement to adolescent development, including the processes of identity formation and moral development. Three key areas are explored: 1) the precursors of faith community membership; 2) the process by which a belief system is chosen; and 3) the ways in which religious belief is supported by a faith community once it is joined. Of specific interest are the ways in which religious community integration nurtures the evolution of religious belief, including through intergenerational support, religious peer groups, and a connection to the ritual and history of a faith tradition. In particular, the influence of peers is examined, both for its role in the initial establishment of a religious identity as well as its role in the maintenance and growth of religious belief. The current study utilizes a phenomenological approach to the qualitative data analysis of adolescent interviews with subjects ranging in age from 12-21 years, from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities, representing a religiously and ethnically diverse sample. The narratives of participants have been analyzed to allow for the distillation of themes across contexts. This phenomenological analytic framework allows for exploratory hypothesis generating on dimensions of developmental support derived from religious community.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research has shown that much of the world's youth is religious (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Benson, Scales, Syvertsen, & Roehlkepartain, 2012; Smith & Denton, 2005). Both adolescence and emerging adulthood have been found to be spiritually formative periods (Fowler, 1981; Good & Willoughby, 2007; Kelley, Athan, & Miller, 2007; Marcia, 1980; Ozorak, 1989) that have the potential to yield a more developed and well-understood sense of one's own religious or spiritual identity (Braskamp, 2008). Smith and Denton (2005) found that most American adolescents see their religious faith as an important aspect of their lives, and the average age of religious denomination conversion has been estimated to be between 12 and 18 years (Donelson, 1999). These findings illustrate that religious beliefs are explored and developed throughout adolescence.

Though religion traditionally has been studied as related to clinical prevention, with a focus on how belief might reduce the incidence of new symptoms or pathologies in adolescent outcomes, more recent research on the topic has expanded to include the study of positive outcomes related to religious belief in adolescence. In this area of exploration, religion has been found to play a powerful dual role, serving both as a protector against risk behaviors (e.g. Knox, Langehough, Walters, & Rowley, 1998; White et al., 2006) as well as a promoter of positive development (e.g. King & Furrow, 2008; Regnerus, Smith, & Fritsch, 2003; Rew & Wong, 2006).

1.1 Impact of Religious Community

In examining reasons for religion's impact on adolescent development, limited but compelling research has isolated the importance of religious community. Historically, community has been seen as a critical component of religion more broadly: Simmel (1905)

noted: “The faith which has come to be regarded as the essential, the substance, of religion, is first a relation between individuals” (p. 366). For adolescents, religious community offers “opportunities and supports” (Zeldin, Pittman, & Irby, 1994) that may buttress development, providing “legitimate opportunities for self-directed learning and for participation in the adult world” (Zeldin & Price, 1995, p. 9). The basis of religious commonality experienced within a faith community may offer a social context of open dialogue and support, which creates an optimal environment for the central tasks of adolescence, such as identity exploration and individuation (Fry, 1998). Garbarino (1995) evoked the sense of security that may be derived within these spaces when he described religious congregations as “institutions of the soul” (p.150) and “spiritual anchors” (p.150) that provide a safe space for existential questioning.

Religion provides a context not only for life’s deeper questions to arise, but also for them to be midwifed through the support of a faith community. In fact, religious community may actually assist adolescents in managing their developmental experiences: Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, and Boardman (2001) found that Presbyterians who received spiritual support from church members were more likely to use positive religious coping responses, and Krauss et al. (2012) found that community support was a significant contributor to thriving among Muslim adolescents.

Yet, despite a robust and meaningful base of evidence that supports the exploration of the religious “work” of adolescence, qualitative research into the impact of faith community involvement during this life stage (Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008) remains limited. Researchers such as Hart (2006) have given voice to the type of more nuanced question that necessitates exploration in regards to adolescent religious engagement: “What kinds of religious participation enhance and what activities actually thwart development?” (p.174). It is reasonable to surmise

from existing research that religion may provide a unique opportunity for the developmental tasks of adolescence – including, but not limited to, identity formation and moral development – by providing access to a community that allows adolescents to more directly engage in these processes. As such, the religious community experience is of particular interest within the present study.

1.2 Faith Development as a Process

Prior research has elucidated the stages of adolescent spiritual development in a way that supports the exploration of it as a complex process. Examining religious identity development in adolescents, Marcia (1980) found several distinct identity statuses: *diffused* adolescents are neither exploring nor committed; *foreclosed* adolescents have committed to a religious path without exploration; *moratorium* adolescents are exploring and not yet committed; and *achieved* adolescents have come to a commitment through an exploratory process. Likewise, Fowler (1981) posited a faith development theory that transitions from a *Synthetic-Conventional* faith, where adolescents conform their beliefs with those of significant people in their lives – such as parents and peers – to an *Individuative-Reflective* stage, which includes the ability to think critically about faith constructs that they previously accepted without questioning (Fowler, 1981; Fowler & Dell, 2006). Marcia and Fowler's developmental distinctions illustrate a sophisticated religious exploration in action.

Delving further into the unique pathways that adolescents take to religious identity, Benson and Roehlkepartain (2008) identified three aspects of adolescent spiritual development: *awareness* or *awakening*, which allows for a sense of personal meaning or spiritual identity to develop; *belonging*, which facilitates the development of relationships with other people as well as with a higher power; and the *living out of spiritual identity* via establishment of relationships

and carrying out of actions. These three processes illustrate that adolescent religious development instigates both internal processes, such as finding a sense of purpose or meaning in one's life, as well as external processes, including relationship-building and right action.

To date, research on the topic of adolescent religiosity mainly has been written within a single faith tradition or setting (e.g. Good & Willoughby, 2007), or else very broadly across multiple religious contexts. As such, it has not allowed for the depth required to understand what is clearly a nuanced process. In the present study, interviews with adolescents about their faith community experiences provide the opportunity to better understand the ways in which religious life is entered into, how religious faith is solidified, and how it is supported. This investigation may be thought of as examining each faith tradition's *Precipitants, Process,* and *Support. Precipitants* of religious involvement are its precursors, or the circumstances by which an adolescent arrives at the decision to become involved in a particular faith community; *Process* is the internalization of the faith community's belief system, via a personal commitment; and *Support* represents the ways in which engagement with the faith community buoys an adolescent's belief system and extends its reach into his or her daily lived experience. The present study's inductive coding process allowed for themes to emerge organically, so that they could be utilized to inform the presentation of these findings through the interpretive frame of each group's *Precipitants*, *Process,* and *Support.*

1.3 Precursors To Faith – "Precipitants"

One area of investigation within the current study relates to the way in which adolescents describe their introduction to their faith community. Regarding the transmission of religious values and beliefs across generations, prior research has shown that the most accurate predictor of religious involvement is the religious background of one's upbringing (Voas & Crockett,

2005), and the consistency and strength of parents' behavior determines the level to which religious values are transferred to offspring (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009). In addition, household participation in religious life, as well as religious belief itself, influence the level to which religiosity is transmitted to the offspring in a subsequent generation (Iannaccone, 2003). In the context of this study, religious family life is understood to be a type of spiritual "marinade," by which adolescents may become engaged with religion via religious modeling.

1.4 Faith Development – "Process"

This study seeks to examine the process by which religiously involved adolescents internalize religion and claim a particular faith tradition as their own, and how this decision serves their maturation process. Spirituality has been described as "addressing ultimate questions about life's meaning, with the assumption that there is more to life than what we can see or fully understand" (Fetzer, 1999, p. 2). Several developmental tasks that occur during adolescence, including moral development and identity formation, have been studied in the context of religious life, and religion has been shown to play a pivotal role in these adolescent undertakings (Layton, Dollahite, & Hardy, 2011; Good & Willoughby, 2007; King, 2003).

Adolescents desire to make sense of the world and organize their experiences into a cohesive whole (Erikson, 1968), and questions about one's religious faith may naturally arise during this process; insightful research exists examining the domains of religion and spirituality in adolescent identity development (Fulton, 1997; Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2001; King, 2003; Marcia, 2002; Markstrom, 1999; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999). Since identity development occurs alongside cognitive advances that allow them to think and reason more abstractly (Piaget, 1948), adolescents may be encouraged to identify their own religious beliefs as they begin to think more critically about previously held beliefs and come to a more nuanced

understanding of their own intuitive knowing (Loder, 1998; Markstrom, 1999). King (2003) hypothesized that religion may serve dual needs in the context of adolescent identity cohesion: "This quest is marked by yearnings and behaviors that bond them to or locate them within something beyond themselves and simultaneously affirm their sense of uniqueness and independence. At its best, religion offers both" (p. 198).

Adolescents may use their denomination's belief system to assist them in making judgments, since nearly all religions offer norms and practices that provide a connection to a broader cultural framework beyond the individual (Haidt, 2007). Prosocial moral reasoning literature shows that judgments about fairness increase in complexity during adolescence (Carlo, Koller, Eisenberg, DaSilva, & Frohlich, 1996), which illustrates that these newfound reasoning skills are put to use in the moral domain. During this time, adolescents are able to navigate more complex and sophisticated moral quandaries, such as those wherein their own needs and the needs of others are in conflict (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNally, & Shea, 1991). It has been hypothesized that this increased moral understanding is related to attending changes in both social and cognitive development during adolescence (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, Delisi, & van Gulik, 2008). Hart (2006) saw this investigation as essential: "Entertaining big questions about meaning, suffering, and so forth may help shape character by validating such ultimate concerns amid a media deluge that seems to emphasize sexuality, materiality, consumerism, and celebrity" (p.174). As these questions arise, adolescents may find that religious identity plays a role in how they choose to craft their answers.

1.5 Maintenance of Faith – "Support"

Once committed to, adolescents' belief systems are supported and enhanced by engagement with a religious community. The support and sense of collective identity provided

by religious communities is one that Erikson (1965) saw as necessary for the formation of a stable identity. Indeed, Erikson (1968) saw religious community as an ideological context wherein a personal belief system could be tested, and where an adolescent could find the "trust in oneself and in others" (p. 128) that is a part of the process of exploring and committing to one's identity during this life stage. By offering an opportunity to engage with life's most complex questions within the safety of a group in which one feels a sense of belonging, religious community encourages the search for meaning that is central to the process of identity exploration (Benson, 1997; Hill et al., 2000).

It has been posited that involvement in a religious community provides a sense of self-efficacy and an increase in self-esteem (Ellison, 1993), as one is accepted and made to feel of value. The availability of both formal rituals and informal forms of social support within religious communities, such as advice giving (Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999), allows for relationships of openness and trust to grow. These relationships provide opportunities for deep self-reflection in a safe space, as well as the internalization of values and beliefs (Colby & Damon, 1995). In addition, they provide opportunities for questioning and interpreting one's life experiences as they occur (Swanson, Spencer, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999).

Religious community also may aid specific tasks in adolescence, such as identity formation and moral development. As they seek to define themselves, adolescents may find that the communal religious experience can provide a more ordered way for them to make meaning of the world and of their own stance within it (Erikson, 1968; Loder, 1998). Religious communities' cohesive structures often provide values systems with ideological underpinnings that provide a direct emphasis on personal development (Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Damon, 1983;

Erikson, 1968; Maton & Rappaport, 1984; McAdams, 1988; Yates & Youniss, 1996). In addition, religious commitment has been linked to the process of moral development (Colby & Damon, 1995; Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995; Walker & Reimer, 2006), as "people's goal systems are reordered around sustainable caring commitments framed by spiritual ideology" (Walker & Reimer, 2006, p.235). Kerestes and Youniss (2003) hypothesized that it is religion's clarity in regards to morality – a sense of right and wrong – that allows adolescents to be supported in their efforts to create their own stable moral codes.

The social context of religion offers a setting in which connection provides inspiration, wherein adolescents may see firsthand the living out of religious ideals by their community. Émile Durkheim noted that religion helps to build morality because of its emphasis on connecting the individual to the collective (Haidt, 2007). Erikson (1968) believed that this was the most critical role of religion within identity development: Allowing adolescents to see abstract concepts of religious code carried out by fellow community members. King (2004) found that religiously active youth had a greater alliance of worldview, values, goals, and beliefs with friends, parents, and other adults as compared with youth who were less religiously active. This alliance may be related to the opportunity provided within religious communities for spiritual modeling (Oman & Thoresen, 2003), or emulating the example of spiritual role models such as lay members of the community, those in leadership positions, or historical figures within a given ideology. This process can be very powerful: As Bandura (1986) noted, "The power of example to activate and channel behavior has been abundantly documented" (p. 206).
The religious community also provides the opportunity for engagement with peers and role models who exhibit low-risk and pro-social behaviors (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2003), allowing adolescents the chance to observe and become involved with the real-world application of shared

values. Recent research has shown a link between adolescent religiosity and prosocial behaviors, suggesting religion's influence on relational patterns. Specific positive outcomes found to be associated with religiously active youths have related to higher levels of various cooperative behaviors, including personal restraint, adult support, school engagement, and social competence (Wagener, Furrow, King, Leffert, & Benson, 2003). Likewise, students with a stronger sense of religious identity have endorsed more prosocial concerns related to the needs of others (Furrow, King, & White, 2004). Particularly for adolescents, a process of spiritual modeling may be essential in the development of their own morality, because "people can acquire abstract principles but remain in a quandary about how to implement them if they have not had the benefit of illustrative exemplars" (Bandura, 1986, p. 73).

1.6 The Current Study

Adolescent spiritual development has been well documented as a phenomenon, as have its consequences for health and well-being (e.g. King & Furrow, 2008; Knox, Langehough, Walters, & Rowley, 1998; White et al., 2006). Yet despite an increasingly robust field of study of religiosity in adolescence, King (2003) noted that researchers still do not possess "the terminology and conceptual understanding" of adolescent religiosity (p. 201).

Utilizing interviews with adolescents involved in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities, this study seeks to fill a gap in the research as it relates to the lived experience of religion in adolescence. It examines how adolescents become engaged with their religious communities, as well as how their religious community involvement guides their everyday lives. Through qualitative analysis of the subjective experience of adolescents within distinct faith traditions, the present study may be conceptualized as a method by which to understand what

propels adolescent spiritual development: What compels it from within, and what encourages it from without.

By elucidating *how* and *why* adolescents engage with religious communities, uncovering what of value is gained in their alliance with a particular group, this study may offer insight into what is helpful in developmentally supporting adolescents. As Johnson and Boyatzis (2006) state, "The challenge is to understand how this development is psychologically organized and culturally scaffolded in ways that are both valuable and true" (p.220). In exploring what is meaningful to adolescents about their religious communities, three areas of particular interest are explored: The path toward religion (*Precipitants*); the commitment to it (*Process*); and the maintenance of a belief system, once it is realized and owned (*Support*).

Key research questions of the current study relate to the choosing of a specific religious group; the joining process; and the daily lived experience of being a member of one's religious community. Specifically:

1. What are the precipitants or factors contributing to the decision to become active in a religious community?

Adolescents may begin their religious trajectories in the home, through the religious beliefs of their families of origin; they may, conversely, find religion entirely on their own. Of interest in the present study is the ways in which adolescents are exposed to religious faith in their lives, and how it impacts their process of exploration. This knowledge provides nuanced insight into the bedrocks or foundations of the process of joining a particular religious community.

2. How does the process of joining a religious community unfold?

A richer understanding of the religious exploration process as described by adolescents may inform a collective knowledge of the evolution of adolescent faith. Interview data provides the opportunity to access detailed descriptions of a highly personal quest, one that results in the joining of a particular religious group. Of particular interest is how adolescents describe the journey that leads them to their faith community, both individually and across faith community contexts. Included in the exploration of this research question are various paths toward membership, including sudden shifts in perspective precipitated by life events as well as more gradual explorations of a variety of religious beliefs.

3. What are the means of support – both for religious belief itself and the work of adolescence more generally – found within the religious community?

Aspects of faith community membership are explored for their influence on adolescents' faith trajectories and, more broadly, their impact on adolescents' maturation processes, particularly as related to the development of moral belief systems and stable identities. Aspects of faith community life that are relevant to this query include access to intergenerational support within the community; access to peers who share the same beliefs; a connection between one's faith and one's everyday life decisions; and a sense of shared history, ritual, and tradition within the community of faith.

4. What are the commonalities in experiences of adolescents across various religious traditions as they become committed to, and engage with, their faith communities?

A greater awareness of cross-faith implications on adolescent processes may inform how religion, broadly speaking, can best support the dynamic developmental work of adolescence. A more complete understanding of the universal aspects of faith community membership in adolescence – particularly its precipitants, the process by which it is joined, and the "living out"

of its core philosophies everyday life – explicates how religious communities might offer contexts that encourage positive developmental trajectories.

Chapter 2: Methods

This qualitative study was designed to investigate the contribution of religious community involvement to adolescent development, including the processes of identity formation and moral development. To address this objective, it used secondary analysis of interview data originally collected as part of a mixed-methods six-year investigation of spirituality, mental health, and well-being in adolescents (Miller, 2006). The qualitative component of the original study, which was descriptive and exploratory in nature, was intended to explore spiritual development among adolescents from different backgrounds (Kelley, Athan & Miller, 2007). It was based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a religiously and ethnically diverse sample. The original study generated a very rich dataset on adolescents and spirituality with scope for additional analyses not conducted by the original researchers. The present study was designed to make use of a subset of this existing rich source of data. While the original researchers used grounded theory methods to analyze the interview data, which are concerned with generating explanatory theories of social processes, the current study utilized a phenomenological approach. This approach focuses on understanding the fundamental nature of a social phenomenon – in this case the contribution of religious community involvement to adolescent development – by exploring how individuals experience and attribute meaning to this phenomenon in their own lives (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Thematic analysis methods were used within this approach to analyze data from the interviews of all 28 participants from three faith communities, a sub-sample of the original sample of participants which had included a wider range of communities.

2.1 Research Questions

The main research questions of the study were:

1. What are the precipitants or factors contributing to the decision to become active in a religious community?
2. How does the process of joining a religious community unfold?
3. What are the means of support – both for religious belief itself and the work of adolescence more generally – found within the religious community?
4. What are the commonalities in experiences of adolescents across various religious traditions as they become committed to, and engage with, their faith communities?

2.2 Sampling and Recruitment

The original study used a purposeful sampling strategy and snowball methods (Noy, 2008), in which the majority of subjects were recruited through networks based on individual relationships, such as personal contacts. Purposeful and snowball sampling methods are not intended to generate a representative sample of a wider population, but rather a sample of individuals that have particular characteristics or experiences (Wilmot, 2005). They are well suited to phenomenological inquiry, as it is important in this type of research that all subjects have experienced a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Purposive and snowball sampling methods are also especially helpful when these individuals might be hard to identify or gain access to using other sampling methods (Lobiondo-Wood & Haber, 2002). The sampling methods used in the original study were designed specifically to generate a sample of adolescents aged 12 to 21 who were: (a) interested in and ability to discuss their personal, spiritual, and religious experience, and (b) representing highly diverse ethnic, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds (Kelley et al., 2007). The intention of this sampling technique was to represent a

broad range of ethnicities, religious affiliations, and ages. Subjects were acquired through small groups, schools or camps, places of worship, youth organizations, and social events in New York City and the surrounding tri-state area. Selected individuals were asked to provide names of other adolescents within their communities who might be interested in participating in the study. These sampling methods meant that all participants were selected from referrals stemming from an original group of moderate religious adolescents and were open to participating in this form of research. While not representative of their wider communities, the sampling methods were in this way deliberately intended to exclude those with more extremist or atypical religious beliefs and attitudes.

Selected participants were informed that they would be asked to complete a semi-structured interview, featuring open-ended questions with no right or wrong answers. Adolescents who volunteered for the study received compensation in the form of a $20 cash payment. In total, a sample of 130 adolescents ranging in age from 12 to 21 was generated in the original study (mean age = 16.20). Approximately 52% of the sample were female and 48% male. The sample included participants from five main ethnic groups and was categorized based on self-reported affiliation in terms of nine religious/spiritual communities (including "other" or "no religious/spiritual affiliation").

For the purpose of the present study, it was decided to use a subset of interview transcripts from the original research, including participants in three faith communities: Muslim, Jewish, and a Protestant Christian community defined by the original researchers as "Hip Hop Church," a sub-group of Protestant Christians whose members all attended the same Methodist church in Harlem. These three communities were selected for analysis as contrasting examples of mainstream religious communities, whose respective members might be expected to exhibit

contrasting socio-cultural backgrounds. Aligning with the aim of the original study (Kelley et al., 2007), the present study focused on achieving a sample with diversity of experience, including ethnicity and religious group affiliation. The Hip Hop Church participants were specifically selected as a group from a lower income area and representing the Christian faith community. Anecdotal information provided by the research team indicated that, in contrast, the Jewish and Muslim samples were drawn from suburban New Jersey and suburban Long Island, NY, and were mainly upper middle class and middle class, respectively.

The final sample used in this study consisted of 28 adolescents, of which 11 were Muslim, 9 were Jewish, and 8 were from the Hip Hop Church community. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristic	N (%)
Gender	
Female	13 (46.4)
Male	15 (53.6)
Age (years)	
12	2 (7.1)
14	1 (3.6)
15-16	6 (21.4)
17-18	10 (35.7)
19-21	6 (21.4)
Unknown	3 (10.7)
Religious/Cultural Group	
Jewish	9 (32.1)
Hip Hop Church	8 (28.6)
Muslim	11 (39.3)

2.3 Data Collection

In the original study, semi-structured interviews were conducted in subjects' homes, places of worship, libraries, community centers, camps, and schools. On average, interviews

lasted approximately one and a half hours. They were conducted and recorded by clinical psychology graduate students, who subsequently created verbatim transcriptions of each interview. The advantage of using semi-structured interviews in qualitative research is that this allows a researcher to explore issues relevant to the research questions in ways that best reflect the participants' personal understanding and experience of these issues (Cozby, 2001; Groenewald, 2004). In the original study, each participant was asked the same main questions, covering various domains including the perceived influence of parents, peers and other social factors on the participant's spiritual and personal development. The list of interview questions is included as Appendix A.

However, interviewers were required to achieve maximum flexibility and follow-up questions were therefore unique to each subject, with topics based on that individual's responses. Participants were encouraged to provide anecdotes and other accounts of their personal experiences. This approach allowed the researchers to investigate the spiritual, religious, and moral dimensions of the subjects' own experiences and perspectives, in ways not pre-defined by the literature or the research questions. This extended to operational definitions of spirituality, which were not used to guide interviewers a priori; instead, this definition was left broad so that data analysis could elucidate how participants experienced and defined spirituality. This generated a very rich dataset suitable for both grounded theory analysis (as used in the original study) and phenomenological analysis (as used in the current study).

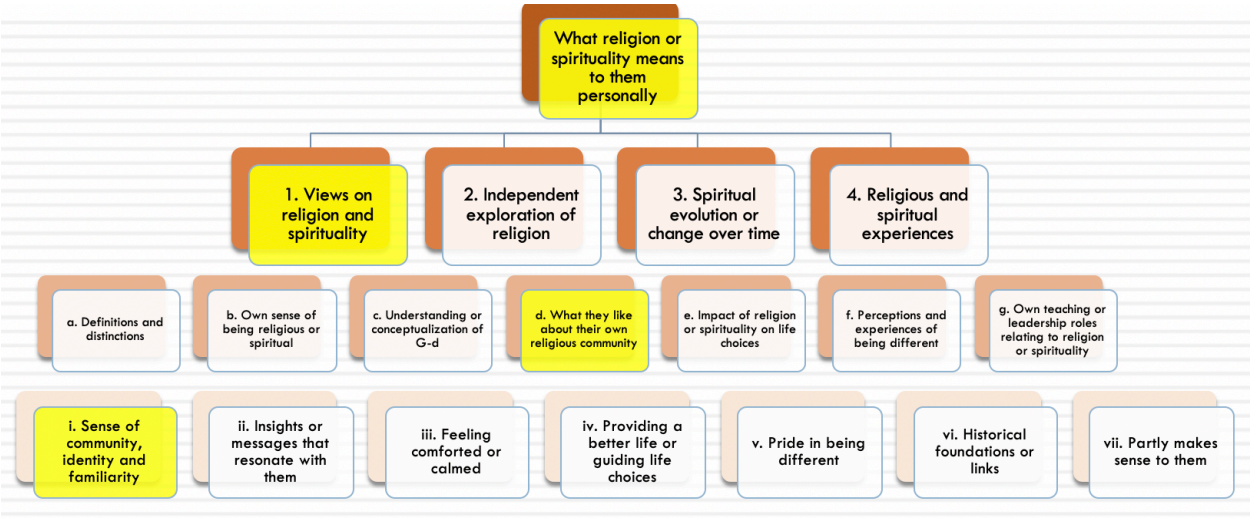
2.4 Data Analysis

The 28 interview transcripts received from the original research team were imported into the NVivo qualitative analysis software for the purpose of thematic analysis in the current study. Thematic analysis is well suited to the phenomenological approach taken in the study, and is a

method used for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). It is a largely inductive or "bottom up" approach: Themes are identified from the data itself rather than pre-defined, to ensure that these most accurately reflect the understanding and experiences of the participants (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). However, it can be helpful to combine inductive with deductive or "top down" coding, in which the main themes are first identified from the research questions or the interview domains (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This helps provide structure to the early stages of coding, while subsequent stages help ensure that the final distribution of codes or themes most accurately reflect the data and the unique experiences of participants.

In the current study, the researcher first read all the transcripts thoroughly to provide familiarity with these and created several top-level codes (or "nodes," in NVivo terminology) relating to the main interview domains. Then, several stages of coding were conducted, in which the researcher worked systematically on each transcript within NVivo, creating and naming codes to capture the meaning of extracts of interview data and allocating relevant material to these. In subsequent stages, the codes were modified, combined, or removed until the final distribution of codes or themes was believed to most accurately reflect the participants' understandings and experiences as conveyed in their interviews. A Microsoft Word version of this, or the project "codebook," was also compiled based on the NVivo dataset, and is attached as Appendix B. Figure 1 provides an example extract of this codebook. In this figure, the second row shows all the sub-themes relating to the main theme "What religion or spirituality means to them"; the third row shows all the sub-themes relating to "Views on religion and spirituality", and the fourth row shows all the sub-themes relating to "What they like about their own religious community".

Figure 1: Extract from Coding Tree



In a subsequent stage of data analysis and interpretation, the researcher re-examined the data coded against each of the main themes and sub-themes, in order to understand the ways in which these could be used to answer the specific research questions as outlined earlier in the chapter. These findings have been reported for each of the three communities covered in the study, using verbatim quotations from the interviews to ensure that the original "voices" of the participants are preserved, in line with the phenomenological approach of the study.

2.5 Measures of Research Quality

It is important to be able to demonstrate that a research study meets high quality standards in order to justify its findings or conclusions. In quantitative research, for example, the concepts of validity and reliability are generally used to assess whether the study actually investigated what the researcher intended to investigate, and whether the research instruments would be likely to generate consistent results if used again (Denscombe, 2003). These concepts are less well suited to qualitative research, in which standard measurements of the phenomena of interest are not used, and in which more flexibility is applied in data collection in order to capture individual experiences. For this reason, Lincoln & Guba (1985) recommended that

different criteria should be used for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research studies, which they defined as credibility (that the findings appear credible or true), dependability (that the same or similar findings would emerge if the study were repeated), transferability (or the relevance of the findings to other groups or contexts), and confirmability (or the ability to show that the findings were generated using an objective approach and were not influenced by researcher bias). Demonstrating that the present study meets high standards against these criteria is complicated by the fact that it is based on secondary analysis of existing data. However, the methodological details of the original study have been well documented in publications based on this study (e.g. Kelley et al., 2006) and indicate that these standards were met. In the case of the present study, the researcher aimed to ensure that the findings are credible, dependable, transferable and confirmable by following best practice methods in coding and thematic analysis, making efforts to remain fully objective at all stages of the analysis and interpretation process rather than being influenced by previous literature or existing perceptions, and ensuring that all stages of the research process were adequately documented in order to allow others to evaluate these or replicate the procedures.

An inter-rater reliability exercise was carried out in order to verify the accuracy of coding (see Smith & McGannon, 2018; Syed & Nelson, 2015). A second coder (graduate student) was asked to use a thematic analysis approach to carry out qualitative coding of three of the interview transcripts. Training notes and background information on the study were provided. Three transcripts were selected for this inter-rater reliability exercise, one from each of the three major groups of respondents (Muslim, Jewish, and Christian) and randomly from those transcripts of similar mid-length. The second coder was provided with the codebook created by the researcher, and instructed to utilize existing codes as far as possible. Once the second coder had completed

this exercise, coding of both the first and second coders relating to the three selected transcripts was merged into a single NVivo file, and coding comparison queries were run to generate measures of inter-rater reliability. A Kappa coefficient was generated for each code, and an overall unweighted Kappa was generated taking all codes into account. The overall results illustrated a Kappa coefficient of 0.25, with individual codes exhibiting a wide range of Kappa scores, the highest being 0.86. In order to determine why Kappa coefficients were high for some nodes and low for others, further investigation illustrated that those with relatively high Kappa statistics had node labels that were very specific, and included words or phrases that were mentioned in the interviews (i.e., the exact word "calm" was included in content coded by both coders within the node labeled "Feeling comforted or calmed"). It is likely that the depth and detail of the coding scheme used in this project made it less probable that coders would code content to exactly the same nodes, thereby contributing to the differences in coding.

2.6 Research Ethics

In conducting research, it is essential to ensure that none of the participants are harmed or put at any form of risk as a result of their involvement; this is especially important in the case of vulnerable groups, such as children or adolescents. It is especially important to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Since the participants consisted of adolescents aged between 12 and 21, the issue of ethics was very pertinent.

Based on methodological details provided in the original research publications (e.g. Kelley et al., 2006), there is no reason to suspect that any participants were harmed or put at risk as a result of their involvement in the study, which was completely voluntary. All participants were treated in accordance with APA ethics and IRB approval (American Psychological Association, 2002), and before commencement of the interview, all subjects provided informed consent and signed a

participants' rights form that provided subjects with information on the study, including measures to ensure confidentiality. In the current study, additional efforts were made to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of the participants by allocating new pseudonyms to the subjects named in the received transcripts and using these in the presentation of findings.

2.7 Limitations

One limitation of this study is its reliance on data collected by other researchers for a slightly different purpose. Although this approach offers benefits in terms of cost effectiveness and access to a rich dataset, the main drawback is that the researcher was unable to probe the research participants for more information specific to her own research questions. In the case of this project, however, this is not seen as a major limitation, as the data was found to be very adequate for answering the research questions. Using secondary data also removed the potential of researcher bias in the data collection process, such as when an interviewer unconsciously encourages participants to give particular types of responses. It can be argued that secondary researchers may be more neutral or objective in their analysis of the data, since they are not directly influenced by the context or their interaction with the participants.

Another limitation is that not all information was available to the researcher on the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. Assumptions were made about these based on anecdotal reports from the original research team, which influenced the selection of participants from particular communities for inclusion in the study. Additionally, the researcher only had access to the research transcripts themselves, and not to the research diaries or notes of the original interviewers. These might have provided additional information relating to details such as the non-verbal behavior of participants, i.e. facial expressions or body language.

Finally, one of the main reported limitations of the original study was the snowball sampling process, in which adolescents who enjoy discussing spiritual issues were more likely than others to be selected. This limitation extends to the current study in that the participants experiences of religion or spiritually may not be representative of those of other adolescents. Although qualitative research findings are not intended to be directly generalizable to wider populations, it is important to take this into account when interpreting the results and conclusions of the study.

Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Jewish Group

3.1.1 Summary of Group Experience

The Jewish group is an example of faith that 1) emerges within the family context, 2) is internalized through a process of individuation, and 3) is supported by the identification of and engagement with a religious community. Yet the specifics by which this process occurs are unique to this group. From the start, the Jewish group illustrates that religion is most meaningful as shared: They describe a transfer of the hub of their religious community from family to peer, which naturally coincides with the individuation process that flows in the same direction during adolescence. The peer group is critical for the persistence of religious identity as an important identifier throughout adolescence. The utilization of a new religious context – summer camp – through which adolescents can engage with their religion fosters a sense of direct connection with the religion that is separate from, yet sanctioned by, the family and its own religious milieu. Summer camp may offer a space from which much of the work of spiritual individuation is accomplished. Table 2 summarizes the emergent themes of the study for the Jewish group as they relate to the main research questions, with these discussed in turn in the following sections.

1. What are the precipitants or factors contributing to the decision to become active in a religious community?
2. How does the process of joining a religious community unfold?
3. What are the means of support – both for religious belief itself and the work of adolescence more generally – found within the religious community?

Table 2: Jewish Group – Emergent Themes

Precipitants	Process	Support
Role of Family	Personal Exploration	Peer Groups Connection with Ritual/History Connection between Faith and Everyday Life

3.1.2 Precipitants – Process – Support within Jewish Group

Precipitants – role of family. The *precipitants* of this process are related to the family's immersion in Jewish culture, specifically its rituals and religious community involvement. A collective family religious identity may offer a foundation for an adolescent's subsequent religious individuation, providing stable religious identity that can be built upon at the individual level during adolescence. From an early age, Jewish adolescents speak of an awareness of their Jewish identity:

> I guess it was just a part of my family…. I don't really remember a point when I realized I was Jewish, but I just know that it's been a part of my everyday life for a long time. (Hannah)
>
> Culturally, I was surrounded by that; that's the only thing I knew. (Sarah)

The interplay between one's religion and one's customs is understood, as they describe a religious context that honors shared tradition and ritual:

> I've grown up always having a Chanukah party at my grandparents' house, because they live right down the block from us…. I've kind of grown up having those parties there. (Elizabeth)

> Since I was little, we've had Shabbat every weekend – every Friday night. So I don't know if I realized it was really a religious thing, or if it was just what my family did. (Hannah)

A family's relationship to faith may offer stability as well as flexibility:

> My parents told me that I needed an identity at least until eighth grade as the basis of my life, and then I can make my choice to convert out of Judaism if I want. I think the fact they were so open and let me be free is what made me actually stay to Judaism more. Because I see religious people whose parents tried to force them into being religious, and they just went the opposite way because of rebellion. (Rebecca)

Process – personal exploration. The *process* itself is an age-appropriate shift from family toward peers that commences in the religious domain. Adolescents take part in peer experiences – specifically those in Jewish summer camp environments – that provide a space for religious questioning and the development of a more personal faith. For many, Jewish summer camp provides the context in which many of the issues surrounding spiritual individuation are addressed. In a sense, camp exemplifies the supportive religiosity of the families: Parents select a religious context in which to place their children, which in turn offers enough openness and intellectual freedom that it serves as fertile ground for individuation. Some adolescents describe a shift toward questioning their family's faith identity, and making choices regarding what aspects of belief to retain and which to abandon:

> Up until eighth grade, I was pretending to be something I wasn't…. I am my own person and I can be myself and I don't have to hold back anymore. (Jessica)

Specific beliefs may be questioned during this process:

> I have decided that denominational Judaism divides people in really very upsetting ways. And I feel like having such – being so strict in denominations and saying, "I'm Reform," "I can't mix with you because I'm Orthodox," all that accomplishes is saying, "I'm one kind of Jew and therefore I can't associate with another kind of Jew," or "I'm this kind of Jew and therefore I can't go to your Synagogue and I can't do this and this with you." So I have decided to be anti-denominational. (Abigail)

During the transition from associating with one's familial religious identity to a more individually selected belief system, religious community resources may be utilized:

> It's mostly through discussions that I've had with rabbis that have really opened things up for me in a way that's just made sense or I could relate to, and that made it easier for me to accept, like, religion. (Hannah)

Many participants highlight Jewish summer camp as fertile ground for individuation work to occur:

> I go to Jewish summer programs. Last summer I participated in a program which actually made me realize a lot of things about my religion and my faith, and that was really important for me. (Abigail)
>
> I think of camp as something that shaped me, helped me discover who I am. I reawakened very differently this summer…. that's when I went to camp…. And that awakening was more specific, because all of a sudden, I rediscovered my spiritual identity, and at the same time I was able to suddenly connect that to my artistic identity, which I had discovered three years back. (Rachel)

The Jewish summer camp environment offers an immersion within a collective peer group that is experiencing a parallel process:

> At the summer program that I did last summer, there were people there from all different denominations. And we were all grappling; we all grappled together with our religion and we formed a community while this stuff was going on.… I mean, we had so many intense discussions about God and about theological issues, that when I'm with them I feel like they're going through the same things that I am. So it feels really good to be with them. (Abigail)
>
> Just the ability to be surrounded by Jewish people – talk to people about it – was really about exploring your Jewish identity and the conflict of what it means to be a Jew. What it means to believe in God, what God is: Daily exploring all of these topics. (Sarah)

In addition, in the overburdened world of adolescence, with daily demands on time and spirit, it is possible that much of the power of a religious summer camp lies in its ability to prioritize the faith individuation process:

> In the summer I go to a Jewish camp…. So that's where I mostly identify my faith, because that's all Jewish, all the time for two weeks. (Hannah)

Support – community integration: maintenance and growth. The *support* for this spiritual individuation process comes via several community benefits: 1) peer groups; 2) a link to ritual and history; and 3) a dialogue between faith and everyday life. A connection to Judaism is deepened and maintained in community with peers, whose support allows for religious individuation work to be enriched by strengthening the bridge between one's faith and one's beliefs and choices.

Peer groups. Peer groups, particularly fellow campers at Jewish summer camps but also those in the broader religious community, offer a sense of belonging and commonality:

> It's really cool to have a community; it makes me feel like I'm actually part of

> something. When I'm at camp, I totally feel part of it. No matter what, we all have something in common: That we're Jewish. When you go to public school, sometimes you find that you have absolutely nothing in common. But when I'm at camp, everybody is Jewish, so no matter what, we all have something in common. It's so much easier to be friends with people when you all have something in common than it is when you have nothing in common at all.… At camp, everyone is friendly because we all know each other's backgrounds, we all know how we grew up; it's just how we are. (Jessica)

Above and beyond the connection provided by shared interests in other domains of life, religious commonality provides an immediate mutual understanding:

> I have a tightness with my friends from cheerleading. We're so close. But there are things that are different; there's a different level of comfort that I get to more easily with people that are Jewish. I feel like if they're Jewish then I know them already, like I know something about them or I can connect with them immediately…. At camp it's really – it's Judaism screaming at you from every corner. (Hannah)

The nuances of one's beliefs are less important than the broader cultural identification of being Jewish:

> Mostly I think being Jewish to us isn't so much spiritual as much as identification. It's more of a community-type of thing for us, like, 'this is who we are.' So many of us have different beliefs inside of Judaism. I have one friend: Both his parents are rabbis, and he's really very strict about Jewish laws. And I'm really very lax about it. We don't connect on all spiritual issues, but we both identify ourselves as Jewish. (Hannah)

Moments of collective practice enhance the sense of being connected to Jewish peers:

> I think that my favorite time to be Jewish is when I was at camp. On Friday night, the

entire camp would first daven together, and then they would all sing together after Friday night dinner. And to have eight hundred people sitting in one place, screaming these songs at the top of their lungs – and, you know, most of them don't know what the words mean, they've just heard the tunes for ever and ever – it's an amazing feeling. It's an amazing time to be Jewish. (Abigail)

Connection with religious ritual and history. The personal process that results in an internalized sense of one's Jewish identity often includes a connection with the faith tradition's history. This may take the form of the significance of particular geographical locations, or a connection to language:

I love the Hebrew language. I love studying it. (Abigail)

These anchors to Judaism's heritage provide adolescents with a sense of context and awe, as well as a way to engage in a more intensive relationship with their religion by delving into the study of its history. The infusion of this study with religious conviction lends to it a depth and passion that may be contrasted with non-religious topics:

Every time that I master something in my Talmud class, I feel a sense of "I did it. I accomplished something." There's much more sense of accomplishment in learning something in Gemara than learning something in Physics. Because learning something in Gemara, it's like I'm connecting with something that happened, something that was made a thousand years ago and I'm doing it today. You know, who would have imagined in Babylonia that there would be a girl sitting on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, in a new world they hadn't even heard of, studying what they had written? It's just such an amazing thought to me. (Abigail)

Connection between faith and everyday life. Religious beliefs may be utilized to make

decisions about the way in which adolescents live their lives. Jewish adolescents speak of their faith guiding a broad sense of morality, as well as offering a link to something beyond oneself:

> It makes you take more responsibility. Because if I do something to hurt myself, it doesn't just hurt me; it is damaging the entire balance of the universe. It makes you feel less isolated; it makes you feel a part of something bigger. (Hannah)

Faith may provide a space to consider profound questions that relate to religious life, as well as a shared value system with peers that allows for activities and friendship to be infused with meaning and depth:

> As my friend Adam said on PANIM [*a youth program*], he said: "When I look at everyone here at PANIM, I feel I see God in every one of their eyes." And that was such an amazing thought to me: That I have the power, I have the ability, to express God through my actions. (Abigail)

This connection between faith and everyday life may also be lived out via social action, through involvement in political causes and volunteer opportunities:

> I'm going to a rally this afternoon to end the genocide in Darfur. If I wasn't Jewish, I probably wouldn't be doing that. It's my Jewish values that affect that, and I realize that there are so many social action projects that continue to drive my religion. (Abigail)
>
> Definitely [being Jewish is] a primary way that I identify myself.… It influences so many aspects of my life: My friends – how many of them are Jewish, like from camp; my political views; my view of the world, with Israel and things like that. (Hannah)

Decisions around how to "live out" one's religion as related to acts of devotion, as well as a living relationship with God, speak to this ongoing relationship with one's Jewish faith:

> I've kind of decided not to do work-related things around Shabbat. Not that I am super

strict, but, like, putting some limitations on what I do. (Sarah)

I love my faith in God. I think that's really, really important to me, having a God that's with me all the time, that I know is there, that's not going to abandon me – even if, sometimes, you know, it doesn't feel like God's there. I just feel it's someone that I can turn to. (Abigail)

3.2 Muslim Group

3.2.1 Summary of Group Experience

The Muslim group is an example of a faith that 1) emerges within the family context, 2) is internalized through a process of individuation, and 3) is supported by the identification of and engagement with a religious community. Muslim group members take the family context, internalize it, and then connect it with a community that offers a place to process and engage with their beliefs. In addition, many Muslim group members describe codes of conduct within their religious environments, which may offer a simplification of complex social interactions involving moral ambiguity and emergent values systems. Table 3 summarizes the emergent themes of the study for the Muslim group as they relate to the main research questions, with these discussed in turn in the following sections.

Table 3: Muslim Group – Emergent Themes

Precipitants	Process	Support
Role of Family	Personal Exploration	Peer Groups Connection with Ritual/History Intergenerational Support

3.2.2 Precipitants – Process – Support within Muslim Group

Precipitants – role of family. For many group members, the *precipitants* of the religious individuation process are found within the family unit's religious beliefs and context. The rituals,

rites, and beliefs that are a part of the family's religious culture serve as a base from which the spiritual individuation process may occur. Family religious life provides a template by illustrating the lived experience of religious engagement:

> I grew up in a Muslim family and I've always been Muslim in my mind. (Sam)
>
> I was born into the religion; my parents are Muslim. So it's been part of my upbringing, always. (Neha)
>
> Up until, I guess, 12, 13, everything I learned mostly came from my parents, from mosque. (Nadia)
>
> My parents were the first people to introduce it to me, and they taught me all the basics of what I have to do: They taught me how to pray, and all the holidays. Like, just everything. (Fatimah)

Children participate as their parents "live out" their religious convictions with behaviors such as prayer:

> I learned about my religion from my parents first. They taught me how to pray. (Zac)
>
> Since I was very small, I learned to pray and all of that. (Neha)

Even before these rituals were necessarily imbued with meaning, they were examples of how religious life presented itself:

> When we were little, our parents started telling us, "Oh, that's God's name," and, like, you're supposed to pray. Even when we didn't know how to pray, we'd just stand there with my uncles or my parents, and it was just around us a lot. (Alesha)

Religious service attendance can offer another opportunity to watch parents "live out" their religion:

> I went to Sunday school at the mosque ever since I was probably nine or 10 years old. So it's been a part of my life that's kind of routine, almost. (Sam)
>
> When I was a kid, my parents used to make me go to the mosque all the time, and go to Muslim-like Sunday school. And that's how I started as a kid. (Zac)

Parents provide modeling to their children that the adolescent can then utilize to make decisions about what aspects of religion are meaningful to them:

> You know, 'You should go when you're young and you can make your mind up about it when you're older, but as a child it's important that you do go' is the general sentiment my parents kind of laid out: That, you know, you go. (Sam)

Several adolescents reveal a stance of openness within the family that allows for them to feel supported in their religious questing process:

> So they're like, "This is what we do; this is what you should do. These are the things we believe in." And I was like, "Alright, sure." What did I know as a four-year-old? I learned these things but, I mean, there wasn't any force. I guess they opened the doors for me. They taught me the beginnings and they taught me how to learn for myself, and they taught me to love my religion and find proof of why the religion is true – why it's real. And that's helped me find out more about it – find out more truths about it. I think they've opened the doors for me, and now I seek out the religion. (Neha)
>
> They didn't want us to be religious fanatics, but at the same time they find nothing wrong with us wanting to learn more…. so they purposely left that decision up to us.... At least in my own home, it was known that it was up to me to make these decisions: Come to the conclusions on your own, not just because I was swayed by some teacher or friend or something. (Rashid)

Process – personal exploration. The *process* of religious individuation unfolds as support from the community supersedes the family unit as the main religious context: The hub for questioning, and the space in which religious beliefs solidify and are maintained. Movement occurs from an automatic acceptance of parental religious values, beliefs, and practices to a questioning process that results in more active decision-making around the living out of religious belief. Adolescents undertake religious individuation as a deeply personal journey, yet the peer group context often is utilized within this process. Several group members speak about a personal study of religious materials or sources that deepens or changes their connection to the religion:

> Most of what I believe in personally, I've thought a lot about myself. From reading, from finding out a lot about different religions, taking bits and pieces and finding my own faith and what makes a good person. (Adam)
>
> Sometimes I like browse on the Internet and search for things and try to learn about Islam from there too. That's like my own thing. (Fatima)

Different points in life are cited as particularly fruitful for a religious individuation to occur:

> Around the seventh or eighth grade, I started reading the Koran on my own, and then after that I just got more and more involved and interested. (Rashid)
>
> In college, my freshman year especially was the time that I really experimented with different religions. (Sam)

This process allows for the opportunity to begin to determine how one's own beliefs differ from others, even those outside the family:

> The monotheism class, the professor warned us that you might not like everything that's said in the class, because he's coming from a non-biased point of view, very objective. So

> when I read it and there are things that I don't believe, that contradict my beliefs, I just don't believe them. I'm like, "Oh, it's from sources that are, like, trying to put the religion down." My faith is strong enough to believe what I believe. (Zac)

Involvement with religious peers – through activities such as student associations – offers a space in which to process religious questions:

> In seventh grade, I started going to the Muslim Society, and there I would take classes and I learned how to read the Koran, and the Koran's meaning, and also history, and, like, a little bit more in depth.... I learned about a lot of things. I've heard different interpretations of things, like what scholars had to say. My parents didn't know a lot…. so I gained more knowledge by going there. (Fatimah)
>
> All my family, my family friends, and then the Muslim Students Association that I am a part of at school. I mean, we all follow the same religion…. we all have the same beliefs. It's a good connection. It's a good community. (Neha)

This process is described as a gradual deepening of interest and engagement:

> Slowly, interest started forming when I could, like, think of the logic on my own, and then I started getting into it. (Alesha)

Several group members reveal that the culmination of this process is a more profoundly experienced religious identity:

> As I'm growing older, I'm becoming more religious in a lot of ways. And I expect that in the years to come, I'll become more religious. I'll become a mother, have a family; it's just having more time to maybe pray and devote myself more to my religion. I would say now as opposed to when I was younger, religion has more meaning to me now. (Nadia)

I just feel like religion plays a lot of a bigger role in my life now than it did before. (Laila)

Support – community integration: maintenance and growth. The *support* for Muslim adolescents' spiritual individuation comes via several resources: 1) peer groups; 2) a connection with religious ritual and history; and 3) intergenerational support. Across these resources, a theme emerges: Support from the collective allows for religious individuation work to be carried through into lived experience, as religious belief serves to inform the choices Muslim adolescents make each day.

Peer groups. Peer groups – which often have been identified and utilized during the individuation process, as noted earlier – can be helpful in the support process by providing a forum to discuss religious ideas with their contemporaries, thereby creating a living dialogue with their religious beliefs:

> Junior and senior year has just been like, I don't know, we're all kind of doing our own things. We're all trying to figure out how religion fits into our lives, and my friends and I, we're definitely like – we're so very different, but we talk about our ideas anyway. And even though we don't always agree, it's nice to have somebody that we can talk to that kind of has the same background, that's kind of going through the same things. (Nadia)

Religiously oriented peers provide perspective that aids adolescents in transcending the stressors of adolescent life:

> I'm very involved with the Muslim Student Association. I think most of my, I guess, like, renewal…. every time I feel like I'm kind of drifting away, my friends kind of bring me back…. Every time that I've felt very stressed or very out of control, it was always someone at school who kind of inspired me and said, "Well, you know, in Islam, these

> are not the things that are most important, that are going to be the be all end all of everything."…. I've always felt like it was the people who were the most in tune with religion were the people who inspired me to go further. (Nadia)
>
> Whenever I do have a problem and I don't know how to deal with it, there's always somebody that I know I can call. And they put things in perspective for me, kind of through religion; and even though it's not expressly like, "Oh, this is what the Koran says," it's just kind of the beliefs and the values that underlie religion that are used to make everything orderly again. (Nadia)

Engaging with other Muslim adolescents provides a context for shared belief systems to be honored and obeyed, such that it becomes easier to follow the ethical codes that are important to them:

> I like the fact that, you know, "Hi, here you are. You're a Muslim, too."…. We can pray at the same time; we have the same understanding. You know, we're not going to go to bars and start drinking. You're not going to pressure me into that, and that's comforting. (Neha)
>
> I guess right now the only thing that keeps me in check is my friends…. I have friends that are a lot like me, that still believe, but they don't practice because, uh, they're lazy like I am. So we try to keep each other in check with other things, so we don't do things we'd regret later when we get older. (Zac)
>
> I have a lot of Muslim friends, a lot of Muslim and non-Muslim friends. But when I'm back here, my family friends are mostly Muslim, so they kind of provide, like, a check for me when I come back. (Sam)

Connection with religious ritual and history. The personal process that results in a

deeply held religious belief system includes an identification with the Muslim belief system, including how that is lived out in the present day. However, it also includes a connection with the religion itself, most notably with its history and rituals. A deep connection with these aspects of their faith provides an anchoring that goes beyond any peer or daily experience. Faith services provide a religious ritual that can be restorative and rejuvenating:

> It's like a spiritual renewal almost every week. Because whatever things you may go through during the week – like homework, or you may get mad at teachers or friends or whatever – I go on Saturdays, and it makes me calm down and makes me focus for a while. It really helps. (Alesha)

The study of their religion can provide a common context throughout life, as well as a connection that may deepen over time:

> I've been in an Islamic school for every year from when I was four.… It's become such a centered part of my life; it's like stability. (Alesha)
>
> I went to Arabic school when I was really small and they taught like reading the Koran and reading Arabic and whatever. And then I had a private teacher for a long time where I guess I learned better. (Neha)

Visiting geographical locations with historic meaning can provide a sense of transcendent context:

> I went to Mecca a couple of years ago and that was, by far, the most moving experience in my life. Being in that place, it was so moving…. the history of it, and that I knew that thousands and thousands of years ago, or whatever, the Prophet walked there and that the first Muslims converted there. Like, all the stories I know about that place, I read about all those stories sitting here on my bed thousands and thousands of miles away. And then

> I'm there, and it just makes it so much more real to me.… And then, to be in that place brings back everything I believe, and it reinforces it in a sense, and makes me feel so much happier that I am a part of this religion.... I don't know if it was an awakening, but when I went to Mecca, that was certainly…. it was very overpowering. (Neha)
>
> There's not one man – there hasn't been one man in the history of mankind – that's been successful in the religious sphere and the political sphere, as successful as the prophet Mohammad has been. (Sam)

Connecting Islam's history to the present day provides a relevance to historical teachings:

> I like the fact that, if you look in history, things that they have unearthed in history that you can find coincide with the Koran. Verses in the Koran talk about things in science that are being found. (Neha)

Following the moral guidelines offered by Islamic belief may provide clarity and simplicity during the complex social interactions of adolescence:

> Some of the things that make sense – like, you know, how you say Muslims aren't supposed to party, aren't supposed to have premarital, any of that stuff – well, all that stuff makes a lot of sense to me. Like, with the alcohol, and how you're not supposed to drink and all that stuff, because look at all the side effects it has. People who start drinking at an early age, their futures aren't bright; they usually end up being a waste of life anyway, those people that start drinking at an early age. (Ali)

Intergenerational support. The value of the community for Muslim adolescents goes beyond peers to encompass another uniquely valuable resource: Intergenerational support in the form of guidance from religious leaders or older community members. The identification and utilization of these community resources allows for a productive dialogue with those who are

"experts" in the religion, providing a role between parent and peer that adolescents see as valuable to the enrichment of their religious lives and, perhaps most crucially, a conduit between religious high ideals and the reality of their lived experience. The stability of regular study with a teacher may provide perspective and calm by linking religious belief with other aspects of teenage life:

> Probably going to my Koran teacher is the biggest thing, because we also discuss things about religion in our lives. It's at the end of the week, on Sunday, so I'm all stressed out about work and have a lot of things to do.… But then, when I go to her, she gives me interpretations about the Koran, like we read and then she kind of explains it to me. She just tells me some of her views on life, like religious views, and that kind of helps me connect religion with what I'm doing in life. So then, even if I'm doing something for English class, if I'm reading literature or something, I can kind of connect religion to that, too. (Fatima)

These relationships are contrasted from those with peers, as there is a productivity to conversations that allows for a sense of progress and forward momentum:

> Right now there's a community organization that I'm involved in, and the facilitator of the group, she has been really instrumental in so many ways in helping me deal with problems that I just thought were so immense, like so huge that there was no way that anybody could really help me deal with it. And I feel like if I had asked my friends to help me, it would be more like temporary solutions. And the facilitator of this group, she's worked with me on really creating, like, long-term change. (Nadia)

Similarly, these relationships can be contrasted with parents, who cannot always serve as resources due to the sensitive nature of specific topics related to adolescent life:

> If I'm going to talk about sex or drugs or something like that, I mean, my parents have a very traditionalistic view, the way their parents brought them up. So you never, ever even bring those words up. So I'll go to my discussion leader – he's a 28-year-old guy, so he knows what we're going through. (Adam)

Access to regular knowledge from a teacher or other community member can provide a consistent opportunity for reflection:

> Islamic teachers, when they are giving lectures about a spiritual path to follow, I think that really gets me connected. You sit there, and while you're listening, you're contemplating, and that helps. (Alesha)

3.3 Hip Hop Group

3.3.1 Summary of Group Experience

The Hip Hop Church group is an example of a faith that 1) emerges out of a desire for a better life; 2) is internalized via a passionate shift in perspective; and 3) is supported by the identification of and engagement with a religious community. Although the Hip Hop group comes to their Christian faith via different avenues – some through a conversion experience or "a-ha" moment, others more gradually – what is notable about this group is the intensity of their emotional connection to their faith community. Regardless of the path taken to it, once arrived at, the Hip Hop Church offers an orienting point of passion, one that supports convictions that move beyond specific religious belief and into the realm of morality and identity. This conviction is buffered by a uniquely experienced commitment to the church, which is lived out through engagement with the broader world, whether through evangelizing to friends who have not yet been "saved" or emulating choices made and values systems exhibited by adult members of the church community. Table 4 summarizes the emergent themes of the study for the Hip Hop group

as they relate to the main research questions, with these discussed in turn in the following sections.

Table 4: Muslim Group – Emergent Themes

Precipitants	Process	Support
Desire for a better Life	Passionate Shift in Perspective	Intergenerational Support Motivation to Share Faith Experience Connection between Faith and Everyday Life

3.3.2 Precipitants – Process – Support within Hip Hop Church Group

Precipitants – desire for a better life. The *precipitants* of this process follow two pathways or access points. One pathway is through a distinct and dramatic moment of transformation. It is individual-led, with the adolescent seeking and finding religion on his or her own, often precipitated by a personal event or moment of reckoning. Another pathway is a more subtle religious identity formation, occurring within the family structure. The family religious context, for some, provides exposure to the idea of faith as an asset or resource; this exposure may lay the groundwork for adolescents to seek out their own belief system and faith community. Regardless of the pathway, adolescents within this group share an "awakening" to religiosity that is experienced and described with a notable level of intensity. Hip Hop Church adolescents speak of a desire for a better life that propels them into a passionate and devoted relationship with the church once they find it:

> Every day you look out there and you see nothing but destruction. You see helplessness and you say to yourself – I say to myself – I don't want to find myself five, six years down the road destroyed when I know I had a chance at one point in my life to correct it…. I've been a Christian for 10 years now, and the last two years, that's when I really,

> really woke up and said, you know, I have to make the choice: Either the world or God. (David)

Life within the church may provide the potential for an altered path, as well as a rationale to make dramatically different life choices than those previously made:

> A friend of mine was killed, and I came to a state of my own…. I was, like, searching in myself. Like, 'Wow, that could have been me.' (Tyler)

Faith may offer a way of life that is the antidote to existing problems and issues:

> Before I got saved, there was a moment in my life where I was going through, I would say, depression, stress. Because I did play basketball and I was kind of good. So it was like at that particular moment, everybody wanted to be my friend because I knew how to play basketball. People was telling me that girls come up to me just because they saw money and dollar signs. But it was those nights where I needed somebody to talk to besides how many points I'm going to get. When I needed that, nobody was there. So then I found myself in a state of depression and then I stopped going to school for a while. And my mother told me to come to church and I really wasn't into it. Like, I really didn't care for it. So I would come just to make my mother happy. And on my birthday, actually, my mother told me to come to church.… And it was like I had no choice but to surrender my life. (Darius)

Some adolescents have seen family members of faith benefiting from their beliefs, so that religion is viewed as an asset to utilize during times of stress. In this way, religion may have been seen as a worthwhile endeavor even before the specifics of faith were pursued:

> My family – my mom, my dad – have encouraged me. They've gone through things in their lives, and they turn to God, and it just shows me. They've given me a good example to follow. (David)
>
> Everybody got that grandma that's like, "Oh, praise the Lord!" My Grandmamma. I love my Grandmamma. She was always talking about Jesus around me, and she be humming those hymns. You know how it go. I would listen to her and be like, "What she's humming those hymns for?" But she was singing to Jesus because he's so good…. I got it from her. Even when I wasn't saved, I would look and be curious, like, "What is that she's saying?" Now that I am saved, I'm like, "Wow." That was a factor that helped me. (Tyler)

For some respondents, the rituals and traditions around church were a reliable aspect of their lives before they felt a deep connection to faith itself:

> I was born into the religion. My mother's an altar singer, my dad's a rapper and a drummer, and my whole family is based on this religion. We come together, we pray on every occasion, whether it be a good one or a bad one. … Whether we were in church or not, we always had a service, and I've grown to love that: That passion my parents have showed me with the communion of God. (Jasmine)
>
> My family tradition…. it was New Year's, we go to church. And that had a connection to my relationship. So tradition is good. I believe tradition does affect your spirituality.
>
> Going to church on Easter, on Resurrection Day…. that affects my spirituality. (Tyler)

Experiences attending church services with parents illustrate the natural curiosity that is awoken during adolescence:

> I used to live down the block so my dad and I.… we seen the church and were just curious one day and we stopped by, they had like a little campaign inside, like a big tent, and we just stepped in one day and we never stepped back out. (David)

Religious engagement may provoke a somewhat sudden religious quest, even if an adolescent has been attending services for years:

> My mom and my pops started coming to church when I was thirteen. That time I came pretty much for a different reason: It was for the girls; it was a place to hang out. They often forced me to go, but by the age of 16, I made my own decisions. I was very rebellious, did what I had to do, and they really didn't do much – they just, I guess, prayed for me. So I can't really say they had an impact on my religion, but they back me up in everything I do now, and the Bible says if you remain faithful, your kids will remain faithful. So they just been there to inspire me and show me that they never fall off. (Xavier)

Process – passionate shift in perspective. The *process* itself is a transition from "the old me" to "the new me," based around a profound connection to the newly found spiritual community of the Hip Hop Church. Many group members share particular conversion experiences, while others express a choice made to align with the church instead of with the negativity of previous life choices. This process speaks to an identity found and fostered via the church. Some respondents describe a dramatic conversion experience that happens within a very condensed period of time:

> I remember it like it was yesterday…. The reverend came towards me, started prophesizing to me. And then he asked all the men to come around me. And then, when he prophesized, I – boom! Tears just started coming down, and it was like, I don't know.

> I can't explain it, but it was like God spoke to me. You couldn't really hear words, but, like, you know, God was saying, "I love you." Seriously, I didn't hesitate: Got on my knees, started praying. I was in tears for like 30 minutes or more. My spirit was like, "Hello, I'm coming back, coming back. Better yet, I never left." Since I was with the wrong crowd of people, I put it on hold. It lifted my heart, lifted my spirit a lot. (Darius)

Moments of crisis or mounting troubles within their lives may inspire a dramatic turn toward faith:

> So I came to the funeral [*of a friend who was killed*]. And about two, three Sundays later, the preacher was preaching, and he said the doors of the church are open. And I looked inside, and it was, like, moving me to get up there. And it was like God saying, "If you take five steps, I'll take 20 steps. And if you take 20 steps, I'll take 100 steps."…. And I stepped up there, and I'm taking them steps, slowly but surely I'm making my way up there to the preacher. And when I got up there I was just crying…. Seeing my friend killed, seeing him in the casket, but knowing that if I continue down this road this is going to happen. That opened my eyes. I would say that that was a sign from God showing me that it's time to come to Him. It was just me and Him, nobody else. It was almost like I zoned everyone else out in the church and it was only me, God, and the preacher. And I can hear him say, "Come forward, every soul," telling me to come on. And I heard him say, "Everything is going to be all right." I feel like it was me and God. I really feel like I was called. It was my time. Well, I was called before that but I wasn't answering before that. But I felt that that was the time when I woke up and I realized the purpose of my life being here on Earth…. I always believed in God, but at that point I accepted Him as Lord and Savior. (Tyler)

> My old neighborhood where I was raised for 14 years was a bad influence. You know, drug dealers on the corner. But when you come to this church, even though it's a bad neighborhood, once you step into this place you feel that warmth and that soothing embrace of God, whether you're right in your life or not. You always feel that warmth that makes you feel comfortable about who you are. (Jasmine)

The descriptive language surrounding conversion speaks to the desire to leave an old way of life behind:

> I'm letting out all of the things that I held inside – anger, sorrow, misery, doubtfulness, blaming myself, discouragement – everything, guilt, it all came out. I could feel it coming out…. I felt a bondage – drugs – coming out, addictions coming out, and all the other flesh desires coming out before God and the pastor. (Tyler)

In addition, these experiences elucidate the shifting that occurs in order to reorient life in a new direction, with revised goals and values guiding it, and a palpable sense of relief from burdens eased:

> Overjoyedness, very ambitious, fearless, I'll say.... feeling, like, goose bumps; like something's moving on me, but I don't know what it is.... I could feel the spirit on me. That's when I first felt my spirit. I said, "Hey, I'm spiritual!" And I felt important. Because I know I felt, like, the power from that; because I know it's not just the physical and mental. It's the spiritual. Those are all part of my being: Just like Father, Son and Holy Spirit is three. There's three in me, also. (Tyler)
>
> My face lit up with a smile of happiness and joy. I'm like, "Wow, God is back in my life again!" Because I was brought up and raised in church. I was baptized and everything, but then I started hanging out with the wrong group of people. Now I'm back with the

right group of people. Everything is going good for me now. I don't have to worry about nothing, just God in my life and my responsibilities. (Cameron)

Support – community integration: maintenance and growth. The *support* for this process is found both within the church and beyond it, as religious values are "lived out" in everyday life. The church community itself offers intergenerational relationships through its pastors and laypeople, who provide encouragement and the modeling of prosocial behaviors. Adolescent congregants are motivated to extend their faith beyond the walls of the church: The desire to evangelize to others serves to maintain belief by allowing for conversations with those who are not involved in the church about faith-based topics, and provides a way in which church members can clarify their values to others. Finally, Hip Hop Church adolescents bridge the gap between their beliefs and their everyday lives by living out their Christian values even in circumstances and communities where accepted behaviors are at odds with their newfound value systems. Thus, the support for Hip Hop Group adolescents' spiritual individuation comes via several community benefits: 1) intergenerational support; 2) motivation to share their faith experience; and 3) a connection between faith and everyday life.

Intergenerational support. Male preachers may serve as spiritual role models, providing their own testimony of the trials they have overcome through faith:

> We had service, at least nine or ten pastors there preaching…. Hearing the truth about what they go through made me realize, you know, "They're right." Seriously, I didn't hesitate – I got on my knees, started praying. I was in tears for like 30 minutes or more. (Cameron)

They inspire adolescents in the church and solidify their bond to the faith community:

> And me hugging on [the pastor], and it felt that I just came to him and I said, "I

> surrender. I need help." And him saying, hugging me and saying, "I got you," snot all over his robe, all that ugly stuff. But he said "I love you," and he took me in like a son and laid his hands on my head and he said, "I got you." (Tyler)

In addition to clergy, laypeople within the church community may model faith behaviors:

> From the time when I was a kid until now, there's been a lot of lot of leaders in my life: A lot of church members in my life who just show me their example and the way they live their life. You want to mirror that. You want to be just like them. So they definitely affected my life different ways, from how I grew up to how I worship the Lord. (David)

They may serve as resources in a manner that is experienced as familial:

> Once you become a Christian, you have your blood family, and then you gain another family. (David)

Intergenerational relationships within the church may also extend to younger members:

> I hang out with a lot of the younger teens. I do it just to show them – a lot of them know where I've come from, things I used to do, and I want them to look up to me. Not that I'm perfect; I struggle with everything. (Xavier)

Motivation to share faith experience. Hip Hop Church community members may speak about their faith experiences with a notable component of zealousness or passion:

> Coming to church and wanting to see more of God, to feel God more. It's more than something you do for fun. I want to put my whole life into it. (David)

At times, religious commitment within the Hip Hop Church group includes an ardent advocacy that presents as a moral obligation to share what they have learned:

> Now I'm a believer. To be truthful with you, I was kind of ashamed to preach the word of God, because all my friends weren't saved and I was saved. I don't talk how I talk

> anymore. I don't go certain places anymore, because it's hard for me to tell them that because I'd feel down still…. Not now. Not now! I'll tell it on the mountain! Everywhere I go, I'll tell it. No matter what, I'll tell it…. People who are nervous of praying, it might inspire them, because they see another person so willingly doing it daily. So they might see how it feel to talk to God.... I consider that fun, but I take it very seriously, because there is power in the testimony, what I say. This right here is powerful when I'm speaking. When somebody hear this, this might spark something in their spirit, and they might just want to try God. (Tyler)

This desire to evangelize is evidence of a passion for a newfound way of life, as well as a belief in its transformative properties:

> I got other guys coming to church and they're giving their life to God, turning over a new leaf. So I'm seeing that we're touching guys that used to do drugs, and now they're stopping at a young age or older. They're coming here now. We're sending out the message to everybody that God is able. He's always there for you no matter what goes, and they actually believe, turning over a new leaf…. It is affecting them, because I see them coming here every Thursday, every Sunday, Saturday probably, you know. They be coming here to service. I'm like, that's what's up, they actually coming back! I'm like, yo, they be saying, "God bless you,"…. little boys and big guys…. I'm really feeling this. I'm like, God is reaching out to every last one of them, even if it's happening slow. He's doing it regardless. (Cameron)

This process of sharing one's faith also may serve as a mechanism by which church members broadcast their beliefs to others in their peer group outside the church, to explain dramatic changes in life choices:

> My friend, I known him since I was in fifth grade. Me and him used to do everything: Bad, good. When I started getting into church, God made it so I didn't even have to tell him that I can't do this or do that. I would tell him, "I'm going to church," and he would understand. Now he know, like, I'm not stopping. I can't. So he respects that now. Like, he is kind of mad: Sometimes he goes, "Oh, my goodness, you go to church all the time!" I'm like, "Well, if you come and you find out what's going on, you would come, too." But he said, "Nah, I can't do that." So I'm trying to get him to, but we still hang out. I still play basketball with him, or whatever. (Darius)

> They're like, "Yo, how you stopped smoking, how you did that?" You can just stop smoking. It's not that I can't do it; I *choose* not to do it. And you know what I say? I say, "God touched me," that's what I say, because I didn't do it on my own. For real, I be humbled, I'm like, "Yo, I didn't do it on my own… God did it. Why don't you try God?" I'm saying try, and they see a case to see that the Lord is good. That's what I did, and I found out He was good. So I stayed over there. (Tyler)

It may also be seen most simply as a way to connect with others over a topic that matters to them:

> When I'm talking to other people about it, I feel more connected to them. I don't know, it just makes you feel better when you can express your faith to other people. (Darius)

Connection between faith and everyday life. Some Hip Hop Church group members have been exposed to risky and criminal behaviors in their broader communities, and religious community involvement offers access to a healthier, more uplifting way of life:

> To tell you the truth, I was a big, uh…. I used to hustle a lot, so I had to leave that behind. I had a habit: I smoked $300 of weed a week. I had to leave that behind. It's not

> easy at all. I know where I come from and what I've done in the world, and, um, there's certain things you've got to do. It's either all the way in or all the way out. You can't have one foot in and one foot out, or it's not even worth coming to church. If you're not going to do it all the way, don't do it at all. (Xavier)

Religious activity may serve as encouragement to resist illegal or immoral activities that regularly arise in everyday life:

> It's hard, you know? You go to public school. You get these different influences – the music, the language – and it's hard to come out and say, "Oh, I'm a Christian and I don't do this and this because I am a Christian." You know, most people want to go and feel popular and feel comfortable around people, and it's been a struggle for me, even though I'm still young and I'm still learning to grow in it. But you have that influence of temptation and peer pressure that's coming at you constantly. (Jasmine)

This evolution is not without its difficulties, particularly when new choices are met with resistance from peers:

> My relationships with other people have definitely changed. I've had to cut off a lot of people…. I never changed my number, but I still get phone calls to this day about certain things that I don't do no more. I can't find myself hanging out with these people, so my relationship with them too has definitely changed. (Xavier)

> Sometimes it's even hard for me. You have to hold your tongue. You get this temptation to say the same thing to somebody who steps on your toes, and you have to learn how to hold your tongue and be like, "I'm a Christian and I have to represent that in every way possible." And it's hard on me.… The peer pressure, temptation, it all comes from friends. (Jasmine)

> My cousin was always my right-hand man. We grew up together, and he's not a Christian. We used to do a lot of music. He got kind of mad when I told him I stopped smoking, because we always used to…. that used to be our little bond right there, three to four times a day. He's like, "Why you took that away from me?" I used to produce worldly music and I stopped. I won't say I stopped doing it in total, but right now, until I find myself and until I find where my position is that I need to play, it's a hard game…. There's going to be temptation, and thinking that I'm going to just have to do it just for the business of it. So the way I act around people has to be correct. Until I find the way that I can handle myself, I stepped away from it. And I told him that, and he was like, "Wow, you're going to take that away from me, too? You're going to take away the music?" I stepped back. (Xavier)

Yet this "living out" of faith through the utilization of tools such as prayer may serve to strengthens adolescents' bonds to their belief systems, as it provides a sustained dialogue between faith and daily life:

> I'm not going to say that I read the Bible every day, because I don't, but I read it when I can. But I'm always thinking about God. If I hear, like, arguing going on, or whatever, you know, and if it's coming towards me, I'm like, "You know what, just sit down and pray. God will always be there for you." (Cameron)
>
> I pray every night. Whether I be in the mood to or not, whether I fall asleep during the prayer, I always make it a point to pray. And sometimes I pray and I realize what I have done and I just cry and just cry. Sometimes I'm up to one in the morning just crying, laying down, singing worship songs and, you know, even though God knows everything that I've done, I just say it all over again. (Jasmine)

> "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That right there is self-explanatory. If I know I want to be treated a certain way, treat a person with the amount of respect I want to be treated with. (Tyler)

The Hip Hop Church group is notable for the wide variety of activities that adolescents describe as being imbued with spirituality, including Christian Hip Hop and other creative expression, which again provide a link between faith and life outside of the church:

> Wherever I go, I'm always singing God's songs. I'm not singing 50 Cent "Candy Shop" or, like, whoever else. I'm just singing the praises of God wherever I go.… We go in the streets, we sing it out loud. We don't care who's around us. And people be like, "Is that a Christian song?" I be like, "Yes, come to church!" We be having people coming to church, people coming out of the gangs, boys that be dealing drugs, we be having them come in. We just spread the word around, always. (Cameron)

> I'm rapping about God first, but it also plays another role, because it enables me to use my creative genius. By using words of encouragement... so I encourage other people through that, because it's a ministry, and I encourage myself. My own song ministers to me. (Tyler)

> It shouldn't matter how you praise God as long as you're lifting his name up and praising his name in the right way. It shouldn't matter. If you're dancing, you're showing God how you feel. You express it the best way you can. (Cameron)

Chapter 4: Discussion

This study examines the impact of religious community involvement on adolescents across a range of faith backgrounds. The aim of this study was to examine the contribution of religious contexts to adolescent development, particularly the ways in which religious involvement may influence identity formation and moral development. Interviews with highly religious adolescents provided the opportunity to identify particular qualities of religious involvement that are meaningful to adolescents. Participants' robust interview responses revealed their desire to share the complexity of their religious lives, while the qualitative nature of the data allowed for deep and considered analysis.

In this Discussion section, the role of religion in participants' lives is distilled, particularly as related to how involvement in a religious community informs the *Precipitants, Process,* and *Support* of faith development. Although family relationships and individual exploration are important aspects of participants' experiences, of particular interest is the distinct role of peer communities in adolescent religious involvement. As noted in the previous Results section, peer groups illustrate particular impacts on the *Process* of joining a religious community and the *Support* that maintains and grows one's connection to this community. Each group contains variability in the specifics of how the peer group is discussed as an integral role within the processes of both religious individuation and faith maintenance and growth, and presenting each group's findings independently illustrates this differentiation. Yet what comes through naturally within each is a portrait of the peer group as of a two-pronged importance: Instrumental both as a *working space* for the role of religious individuation, and as a *holding space* for the living out and evolution of faith. Participants across the three groups describe peers as instrumental to the establishment of their beliefs, as well as to the alignment of their beliefs with

their everyday behaviors. The overall emergent themes of the study across all three groups are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Findings across Groups

Precipitants	Process	Support
Family Relationships (particularly relevant for Jewish and Muslim group members)	Individual Exploration (often with utilization of peer group)	Community Involvement (particularly via peer groups or intergenerational support) Connection between Faith and Everyday Life (religious beliefs as organizing and clarifying in decision-making)

In this section, these findings are placed in context with existing research related to development, risk prevention, and resiliency factors in adolescence to provide a nuanced portrait of how religious peer groups are utilized in adolescent religious life. Implications for real-world applications are explored, and directions for future research are proposed.

4.1 Grounded in Existing Research

Since the earliest study of psychology and religion (e.g. James, 1902), the developmental phase of adolescence and young adulthood has been seen as a major period of religious transition. Spiritual quest as a universal phenomenon speaks to the desire to find meaning and purpose in the human experience. As developmentally relevant questions about these topics become central during adolescence, spirituality and religion have been explored for their role in supporting this process of deep questioning. Theoretical perspectives have highlighted spirituality's potential to nurture the process of existential exploration which emerges in adolescence, and empirical research has examined more specifically the pathways by which a spiritual life may support adolescent development.

The present study offers a nuanced perspective on the topic of adolescent religious development due to the subtle nature of qualitative analysis. When describing a narrative-based study (Dollahite & Clifton, 2005) into family spiritual life, Boyatzis, Dollahite, and Marks (2006) note that a qualitative approach provides a unique opportunity to better understand the topic: "rich illustrations and explanations of the interface between religious and daily life… would be difficult to tap with quantitative methods" (p.301). King (2009) also highlights the dynamic and deep nature of these experiences when he encourages psychological researchers to acknowledge "the centrality of connections within the community of the young and the complex reality connections constitute" (p.324). The strength of the current study is the depth it provides into this experience, by utilization of interview data that reveals the profound and nuanced experience of religious involvement during this developmental window.

When examining the impact of religious community involvement on adolescents, specifically as related to the study's initial area of interest around the processes of identity formation and moral development, it is clear that the community itself serves as the organized space by which adolescent members are held and supported in their religious individuation. This finding is aligned with previous theoretical studies of faith and relationships, which acknowledged the central role of community and its shared activities and rituals. As Fowler (2001) noted when reflecting on his own Faith Development Theory, "It is important to remember that the structuring operations underlying faith are at best only half of the story of a person's development in faith. The other half has to do with the *contents* of faith – the symbols, narratives, practices, and communities – and the emotional and imaginal responses to life conditions and experiences that exert powerful existential shaping influences on persons'

patterns of interpretation, habit, mind, and action. Any adequate faith biography has to embrace both of these important halves of the story" (p.164).

Additional faith development frameworks, including Clore & Fitzgerald's (2002) Intentional Faith model, assume that "faith, like other psychological processes, must include relationships with others" (p. 97). Psychological processes long have examined and taken into account this inherent inter-relationality (Mead, 1934; Erikson, 1950; Kegan, 1982), whether it is examined between individuals, such as relational spirituality's study of family life and faith (Mahoney, 2010), or in relation to a higher power. King (2009) notes that researchers in the fields of spirituality and positive psychology research concur that "young people do not find true meaning in individual accomplishments and material accumulations, though these may bring some temporary satisfaction, but rather in family, faith and friends" (p.324). It is critical to explore the avenues by which this meaning is found and fostered, with adolescence as a time of potential from the perspective of building psychological health, wherein young people are "on the cusp of all the opportunities and challenges of living" (King, 2009, p.315).

4.2 A Singular Opportunity: Peers

Limited research – such as Schwartz's (2006) finding that both parents and peers influenced measures of religious faith, but that friends carry more influence than parents – reveals that peers are an important component of religious exploration during adolescence, and support the present study's focus on this aspect of community. This study's findings on peer influence are aligned cross-contextually with the cognitive, social, and neurobiological changes that occur throughout adolescence and young adulthood. Adolescents have been shown to have a heightened sensitivity to peer approval across various levels of analysis, which may make religious peer interaction particularly valuable at this developmental juncture. Research into

adolescent neural development (e.g. Somerville, Jones, & Casey, 2010; Spear, 2009) has illustrated how peer acceptance shapes behavior via mechanisms akin to social reinforcement learning (Fareri, Niznikiewicz, Lee, & Delgado, 2012; Gunther Moor et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2011), how adolescents are more motivated by approval from their peers than they are by approval from children or adults (Chein et al., 2011; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005), and how they exhibit brain activity that suggests a link between peer approval and subsequent action (Giedd, 2008; Jones et al., 2014). Relatedly, Somerville et al. (2013) found that the brain systems involved in socioaffective processes have "age-dependent sensitivity" (p.1554), and that particular areas of the brain – including the medial prefrontal cortex and striatum – interact in social contexts to influence adolescent behavior. Newberg and Newberg (2006) note that, following synaptic genesis, neuroplasticity gradually decreases in late adolescence, and they suggest that this developmental phase is "the period in which the person's basic approach to life, relationships, his self, and spirituality are galvanized and fully elaborated" (p.191).

The cognitive resources that arise at this time suggest that peer influence may become more important as one's world view expands (Nelson & Debacker, 2008; Ryan, 2001). The cognitive development that occurs during adolescence has been described by Piaget and Inhelder (1969) as formal operations and by Fowler (1981) within his synthetic-conventional phase; it includes higher-level information-processing, an increased capacity for abstract thinking, multiple perspective-taking, and self-reflection (Byrnes, 2001; Walker, 1980). Yet even as adolescents do the inner work of developing enhanced capacities for empathy, self-reflection (Eisenberg, 1998), and introspection about their own experience (Damon & Hart, 1982), the integration of one's individual experiences into a broader context beyond the self (Clore & Fitzgerald, 2002) naturally coincides with a greater integration of peers into one's daily life and

world view, via enhanced social skills and perspective-taking (Harter, 1999). The exploration of the self, then, becomes entwined with how one relates to, exists with, and understands others. The questions that arise from this process fit into the exploration of the self via identity development and moral questioning, as a more conceptual understanding takes hold.

The present study's findings align naturally with this existing research, further illustrating the ways in which peer support is utilized and integrated into the process of religious individuation, and how religious questing itself is a natural extension of the broadening of one's world view that occurs during adolescence. The selection of a particular religious community reveals itself to be both a choice that defines one as an individual, as well as a choice that places one into a collective – one with the potential to support and enhance the developmental process as related to the broader questions that arise during adolescence.

4.3 Peer "Spaces": Working and Holding

In the present study, analyses of the ways in which religious community affects adolescents illustrate that peer relationships appear to drive the impact of religious involvement on adolescent development, and this may be due to their particularly flexible and useful type of community: One where the deep work of religious individuation may be done, and one that holds space for the continued evolution of one's religious belief system. These findings align with how Scott (2009) describes this singular influence and developmental window: "The beliefs of childhood learned at home begin to be doubted and set aside. Young adolescents go on a search for new beliefs, interpretations of life, meaning and perspectives to address the questions arising for them from the ideas they are experiencing with their new cognitive abilities. Their peer group becomes an important source of information, ideas and models to follow and imitate" (p.462).

4.3.1 Working Space: Peers in "Process"

Erikson (1968) saw identity formation as the primary developmental task of adolescence. While the establishment of one's selfhood is inherently solitary, multiple areas of research suggest that community may be critical in this quest. Even attempts to define terminology around the subjects of religion and spirituality may integrate being *in relation* with others: Koenig et al. (2001) describe spirituality as "the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community" (p.18). The present study reveals peers to be an integral portion of the joining process, as personal exploration is carried out in community with peers to come to an understanding of one's own beliefs. Peer support for the religious individuation process allows for the work of arriving at one's own religious identity to be conducted in concert with peers who are navigating similarly complex questions about themselves and their values. A peer-oriented religious space provides a venue to confront the most complex issues faced in adolescence and bring a spiritual understanding to these questions.

Via specific organized group experiences, religious peer support offers a working space through which adolescents can ask difficult questions and gain support through the process of coming to know their own answers. Though each group has specific entry points – such as a summer camp for Jewish adolescents, or a Muslim student association – the experiences of study participants mirror each other in how they utilize religion's offer of a unique space through which to process one's own individuation. The process of extending one's understanding beyond the self has been explored in the context of religious development as the idea of transcendence (Perkins, 2009), which can be thought of as placing one's understanding beyond the concept of

the self and into a broader context, in what Lonergan (1957) described as "going beyond" (p. 19) the individual to better explore life's deepest questions and come to find one's own answers.

The current study's results suggest that peer groups provide a unique opportunity for the work of exploring and honing one's religious belief system. This is consistent with existing research, given that much of adolescent individuation more broadly is done in the context of peer relationships (e.g. Wentzel, 2017). Although religious exploration often is considered at the individual level, much of the individuation of adolescence is done by moving beyond the self. Fowler (2001) speaks to the "triadic structure" of faith, incorporating the self, "the primal and significant others in the self's relational matrix" (p.163), and "the ultimate Other" (p.163). Peers may provide a link that makes religion more accessible, and peer interaction around the topic may also make it feel more relevant and approachable. Smith and Denton (2005) note, "If a teenager defines serious religion as mostly an adult affair, as many do, then religion comes automatically to feel distant to them, as something that they may "get into" someday when they are older, but not now" (p.185). This point is echoed in this study's findings, through which participants speak to the active engagement with religion via peers: "We're all trying to figure out how religion fits into our lives" (Nadia, Muslim group). In this regard, the peer group moves religion from the abstract to the relevant.

One area of research that may be particularly useful in thinking about how adolescents utilize their peer groups to work through deep questions in religious community contexts is terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1990): As adolescents become more aware of their own mortality, they may rely on religious belief to manage this increased understanding. This topic may in fact solidify their bond, as terror management theory research has illustrated that thoughts of death elevate attraction to others who validate one's own cultural worldview (Greenberg et al.

1990). Similarly, King and Boyatzis (2004) found that relationships provide the space in which adolescence may explore life's significance and meaning, as a religiously-based connection with peers may allay many of the difficulties that make teens feel isolated. In addition, the rituals associated with religious involvement may provide what Quartier (2007) called "a controlled situation in which insecurity becomes endurable" (p. 103). Adolescents are then able to do the work of managing life's most significant questions – which one interviewee referred to as "grappling" – within a deep, personally supportive environment: One that helps them in their quest to determine what they believe and, in that process, to individuate.

4.3.2 Holding Space: Peers in "Support"

The present study's findings illustrate that once religious individuation has taken place, the religious peer group serves as the conduit between beliefs and lived experience. As Ronald Rolheiser (1998) states, "Spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our Eros. And how we do channel it, the disciplines and habits we choose to live by, will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, mind, souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, others, and the cosmic world" (p.10-11). Peers in the same religious community help establish patterns of behavior that integrate religion and life. Similar to the role of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in maintaining one's sobriety, religious peer groups provide both a reminder of one's commitment to one's religious faith, as well as a group that continually renews and supports its maintenance and its growth.

In a sense, this *holding space* serves as an evolution of the *working space*, moving from spiritual individuation as the central task to an integration of religious belief into everyday life as a focus. Much of this process is done in real time, when faced with challenges that are difficult

and cause one to question one's values, principles, or priorities. When typical adolescent conflicts, such as whether to engage in substance use or premarital sex, are "housed" within a religious group, where they may be considered and debated with others from similar faith backgrounds, it allows for these questions to be seen for what they truly are: Spiritual conflicts. As noted in the Results section, participants across groups spoke of the religious peer group as anchoring and protective. Scott (2009) writes, "One of the challenges of spiritual life as lived is the maintenance of congruency between how one is living life and the beliefs and values that are being espoused" (p. 457). The commonality of experience offered by sharing one's religious values system offers an opportunity to stay continually connected to one's faith, and to have one's everyday lived experience more accurately reflect the values of one's religious community. This allows for religion to be activated as a resource or shorthand for right action, which is consistent with existing research on the topic of the impact of religious involvement on adolescent behavior. Simply put, the peer group brings a spiritual underpinning to everyday events and choices that allows for a living dialogue with one's religious beliefs.

When writing about the spiritual life of adolescents, Scott (2009) writes, "I use "spiritual life" to imply that the spiritual is grounded in lived experience. It is not merely a concept or a set of beliefs, values or claims but is grounded in and played out experientially, that is, the spiritual is best noticed in how a life is being lived. It implies a "way" – a way of living and acting that expresses or enacts a sense of meaning, purpose and lived values" (p.456-7). Sometimes this values system is explicit, and sometimes it is simply felt: As Nadia shared of her friends in the Muslim Student Association, "They put things in perspective for me, kind of through religion; and even though it's not expressly like, "Oh, this is what the Koran says," it's just kind of the beliefs and the values that underlie religion that are used to make everything orderly again."

Other times it is a more dramatic shift, as with many respondents within the Hip Hop Church, including Xavier: "I used to hustle a lot, so I had to leave that behind. … It's either all the way in or all the way out. You can't have one foot in and one foot out, or it's not even worth coming to church. If you're not going to do it all the way, don't do it at all." Regardless of how explicit the community's shared values may be, their collective nature allows group members to feel understood, known, and supported in their faith journeys.

Interestingly, religion itself helps adolescents learn how to be a good member of their peer communities, as many qualities valued in religious traditions, such as compassion and understanding, also are ones valued within friendship (Schwartz, Bukowski, & Aoki, 2006). Religion provides "a context for friendship" (Schwartz, Bukowski, & Aoki, 2006, p.314), and promotes the formation of meaningful community by offering a shared belief system and also providing the opportunity for common ground activities and experiences, a basis of friendship (Gottman, 1983). Likewise, friendship itself may encourage the development of religious belief (Schwartz, Bukowski, & Aoki, 2006): "Friendship may become an organizing principle by which children come to involve themselves with the meaning and practices inherent in religious tradition" (p.316). Youth religious practice has also been associated with a higher probability of various prosocial behaviors, including moral values and altruism (Bridges & Moore, 2002; Kerestes & Youniss, 2003). Religious high school students also were found to be more likely to participate in school organizations, and to volunteer (Metz & Youniss, 2003). Indeed, these findings are echoed by the current study's results: Many participants spoke of a shared morality and both formal and informal codes for behavior as guiding principles provided by their religious involvement that they carried into daily life.

This process of utilizing the peer group to deepen one's relationship with religious life is aligned with research on friendship as a developmental context (e.g. Berndt, 2002; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Bagwell, 1999). Schwartz, Bukowski, and Aoki (2006) note that adolescents develop their idea of friendship throughout the maturation process such that it becomes more aligned with religion: "Whereas young children see friendship according to the pleasure or utility that it provides, the mature view of friendship seen among older children and adolescents emphasizes friendship as a form of goodness. By this it is meant that they see friendship as an opportunity to make a positive contribution to (i.e., to promote goodness in) the life of one's friend. These essential characteristics of friendship, specifically its transcendent quality and its link with goodness, make it easy to see how friendship and spiritual development go together for children and adolescents" (Schwartz, Bukowski, & Aoki, 2006, p.315). In a sense, friendship is utilized to deepen this process of being *in relation with* one's belief system as the very nature of friendship deepens, develops, and matures into a transcendent context. Friendship may be the vehicle through which the ideals of religious commitment are lived out, as Adam (Muslim group) describes the process as "finding my own faith and what makes a good person."

4.4 Connection in An Isolated Culture

As the world becomes more connected through the use of technologies that allow people from thousands of miles away to be virtual "friends," feelings of isolation have risen (Twenge, Spitzberg, & Campbell, 2019), particularly among adolescents who are a part of the "iGen" (Twenge, 2006, p.5). A nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents showed that in-person social interactions have declined as digital media use has blossomed (Twenge, Spitzberg, & Campbell, 2019). As King (2009) notes, "Currently the struggle for significance in an increasingly cyber-friendly but personally isolating society intensifies the need for young people

to find meaning in the world and in their personal existence" (p.324). Smith and Denton (2005) describe the current virtual communication era as "a world of information and images that is more disjointed and fragmented, that does not hang together as an organized whole" (p.180). They note that this information is organized such that "authority over standards of knowledge… becomes radically democratized and decentralized" (p.180) and that "discernment is left up to the individual" (p.180). This lack of clarity and overabundance of information may in turn lead to a sense of rudderlessness for adolescents who are searching for meaning and clarity. Relationships anchored within a religious context may be especially meaningful as an antidote to an increasing sense of isolation brought about by the Internet age.

This sense of isolation is enhanced by increasingly vulnerable family dynamics, which leave adolescents more isolated from the adults around them. Smith and Denton (2005) suggest that the isolation that occurs during adolescence may be due to a "structural disconnection" (p.185) between adolescents and adults: "… viewed in broad historical perspective, contemporary teenage autonomy from adults is unprecedented and astounding. Significant numbers of teens today live their lives with little but the most distant adult direction and oversight" (p.185). This lack of oversight may provide an enhancement of peer influence, as peers may "fill in" the gaps created by the absence of a greater sense of cohesive community. The present study's subjects' descriptions of a sense of unity, familiarity, and community provided by religious peer groups take on an increased singularity and importance. It is possible that, as society moves away from more communal and collective experiences as modes of communication and togetherness, religious spaces provide an increasingly rare and precious resource: Engagement with others with whom one can relate.

The ability to speak to each other candidly – since religion is intimately tied into many of life's most pressing questions, and makes them immediately relevant – may be what allows for deep conversations to occur more openly and effectively. In addition, when religious topics have been discussed, it allows for relationships to reach a depth and comfort that may not otherwise be achieved. As many participants note in the present study, a shared religious belief system serves as a shorthand for mutual understanding and feeling related to others within the peer group.

Findings by Smith and Denton (2005) that utilized the National Survey of Youth and Religion (2002-3) illustrate that more religious adolescents are less likely to consume television, pornography, and video games. In this sense, religion can be seen to promote connection, or at the very least *not* promote the disconnection inherent in overconsumption of these media. Perhaps relatedly, more religious adolescents also were less likely to endorse feeling "alone and misunderstood, and invisible as a result of nobody paying attention to them" (Smith & Denton, 2005, p.225-6). These findings illustrate that a sense of connection fostered through involvement in a religious community can impact an adolescents' everyday behaviors, in the ways described by participants in the current study.

4.5 Living Out of Values

The present study illustrates the power of the religious peer group to encourage values that promote positive decision-making. This finding may best be understood when aligned with existing research related to positive psychology and risk behaviors. As King (2009) states, organized religion and the spaces it encourages can be "vehicles" for the "optimal human development" studied by positive psychology (p.323).

The naturally preventive focus of positive psychology is aligned with the qualities that can be explored within adolescent religious life, namely the fostering of a sense of fulfillment

and the building of a meaningful life. King (2009) cites positive psychology's "natural empathy for matters of the spirit" (p.313), and the way in which it can be utilized "to find meaning in life and achieve resilience in the face of adversity" (p.313). Indeed, aligned with the present study's findings about the integration of everyday decision-making and religious involvement, Raftopoulos and Bates (2011) found that spiritual resources were used by adolescent participants in order to overcome difficult life circumstances, including bullying and changing friendships.

These psychological benefits are particularly important when considered alongside neuroscientific research into adolescent risk-taking behavior (e.g. Luna, Padmanabhan, & O'Hearn, 2010; Steinberg, 2008; Zimring, 1998). This area of research has illustrated the unique position that adolescents inhabit, being more sophisticated in some areas of neurobiological development and less sophisticated in others. Adolescents' relative activity in various areas of the brain offers an almost symbolic example of this in-between phase of life: Activity in the accumbens is similar to that of adults', while orbital frontal cortex activity shares more in common with children (Galvan et al., 2006; Matthews, Simmons, Lane, & Paulus, 2004). Galvan et al. (2006) describe these naturally-occurring dysregulations as a part of a process wherein "maturing subcortical systems become disproportionately activated relative to later maturing top-down control systems" (p.6885). Emotion regulation research has examined differential maturation rates across the brain and its impact on behaviors: When studying the biological substrates behind adolescents' difficulty with regulating behavior in emotional contexts, Hare et al. (2008) found that, compared with both children and adults, adolescents illustrated greater activity in the amygdala. These neurobiological correlates to adolescent development show how adolescents possess more and less sophisticated mechanisms of thought and behavior. When understood in the context of decision-making, the specifics of neurodevelopment, which may

serve to encourage immediate over long-term benefits, may place adolescents in a uniquely vulnerable space.

This research into the maturation process of the brain is a different examination of a phenomenon that has been shown in other domains– that is, that adolescents are both out of control and in desperate need of it; searching for answers and not necessarily equipped to find them. Building upon this idea of adolescent predisposition to vulnerability in the emotionally complex processes attendant to adolescence, research from Casey et al. (2010) has developed a "converging methods" approach (p.225), whereby the stress of adolescence is understood from the contributing perspectives of neurobiology, environment, and genetic factors. When considering potential benefits of religious involvement, Scott (2009) addresses "the confusion that comes in a prolonged adolescence of mixed messages and muddled contexts where expectations shift from expectations to be and behave as an adult in one setting and in the next to being treated as a child" (p.459). He refers to the developmental phase between childhood and adulthood as "a dangerous time spiritually" (p.459), noting that we have taken what Victor Turner (1967) referred to as the liminal phase between childhood and adulthood and elongated it, "leaving a large cohort of young people in a state of being neither children nor adults subject to a lengthy period of uncertainty" (Scott, 2009, p.461).

This idea of religion as connection – to a peer group, to a larger community, to a higher power, or to all of these – extends to other findings related to risk behaviors in adolescence. Additional research (Bridges & Moore, 2002; Kerestes & Youniss, 2003) has illustrated associations between youth religious practices and a lower probability of problem behaviors including school delinquency, sexual activity, and drug use and abuse (Bridges & Moore, 2002; Kerestes & Youniss, 2003; Smith & Denton, 2005, p.225-6). Religious teens also were less

likely to be unhappy about their body's appearance and less likely to endorse feeling depressed or sad (Smith & Denton, 2005). These results are elucidated through adolescent narratives in the current study; Zac, for example, cites his Muslim friends as the reason he makes certain behavioral choices: "We try to keep each other in check with other things, so we don't do things we'd regret later when we get older."

Additional research has illustrated that spirituality is broadly associated with several positive psychological outcomes, including subjective well-being (Witter, Stock, Okun, & Haring, 1985); self-esteem (Falbo & Shepperd, 1986), positive relationships (Glenn & Weaver, 1978), and higher grade-point averages (Metz and Youniss, 2003). Religious adolescents also are more likely to endorse positive mental health attitudes such as overall happiness, positive attitudes about their lives and their futures, and overall emotional well-being (Smith & Denton, 2005). Religious peer community becomes an asset or resource to call upon, one that encourages the development of resilience and is utilized in everyday life.

4.6 Recommendations for Future Research

The present study deepens the exploration of religious peer experiences and adolescent development by examining the lived experience of peer influence through use of qualitative data analysis. In particular, through its utilization of three groups that are distinct from each other in denomination, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity, the present study offers the opportunity to examine how the impact of religious experience unfolds across risk profiles, and how peer communities are utilized within each. Groups at both high and low risk illustrate a similar utilization of and reliance upon these religious peer communities, suggesting that this finding is consistent across risk profiles.

As this study's sample was selected to examine adolescents across risk profiles, implications for future research may further examine the unique experiences of religiously involved adolescents across varied demographic profiles and belief systems. In addition, further research in this domain may seek to understand the various levels of engagement adolescents may exhibit in regards to their religious involvement, and their differential impact on development.

In addition, further studies should continue to enhance existing quantitative findings by utilizing qualitative data analysis in order to better understand the nuances of the adolescent religious experience. Put simply, as King (2009) notes, "Qualitative approaches may better help positive psychologists to identify qualities that define the uniqueness of each person" (p.323). In an area of study field as complex and personal as religiosity, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which methodological choice may provide the opportunity for a more elucidating portrait of experience to emerge.

Finally, this study's findings might invite those working with adolescents across both religious and secular environments to view religious involvement as a potential asset during this developmental window. In particular, the community found through organized religion may be of unique benefit, as increasing peer influence occurs as questions about one's place in the world are addressed. Those working with this age group might integrate a deeper understanding of an adolescent's religious or spiritual experience into clinical or outreach work. Allowing for religious individuation to be heard, understood, and supported may strengthen interventions and deliver a valuable resource during a time of deep personal development.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions – Spirituality Interviews

1. Do you belong to a particular religious group?
2. Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?
3. How would you describe your religion?
4. How did you learn about your religion?
5. Do you think there's a difference between being religious and being spiritual?
6. How do you maintain your faith?
7. Is there anything that troubles you about your faith?
8. Can you talk about the aspects of your religion or faith that make sense to you?
9. Can you describe the places or communities that make you feel connected to your faith?
10. Can you describe the places in your community that you feel the opposite of connected?
11. Are there certain activities that help you stay connected?
12. Do you feel like you have awakened spiritually?
13. Can you explain the relationship between your religious faith and your personal spirituality?
14. Can you tell me a little bit about your family?
15. How do you spend time together?
16. What about your friends?
17. Do you ever discuss any big issues with your friends or family, like life and death, spirituality, or the supernatural?
18. And how do you spend time with them?

19. Do you feel your relationships with people have changed as your spirituality has changed?
20. Do you feel like your relationship with your family has changed with your spirituality?
21. Have any particular relationships helped you flourish spiritually?
22. When you need help making a decision, whom are you likely to turn to?
23. Have there been times in your life that were more spiritual than others?
24. Tell me about a really memorable experience in your life.
25. Has anyone close to you ever died? How did you deal with that?
26. What do you think happens when we die?
27. Do you believe life is fair?
28. What comforts you in times of stress?
29. Have you ever noticed strange coincidences that cause your life to change?
30. Do you believe people come into your life and leave your life for a reason?
31. Can you tell me about a time you lost something meaningful to you and later you realized it was for the best?
32. Do you believe in miracles?
33. Is there anything else you'd want to say to represent your spirituality, or anything you think is important for anybody know about spirituality for youth today?

Appendix B

Project Codebook

1st Level Codes	2nd Level Codes	3rd Level Codes	4th Level Codes	5th Level Codes	6th Level Codes
Community Membership and Identification	**Definitions and understanding**	Communities	Religions	Christianity	Denominational Christianity
					Non - denominational Christianity
				Islam	
				Judaism	Identify as Jewish
					What it means to be Jewish
			No religious affiliation		
			Faith-based or ethnic societies or groups		
		Education	Attending own-faith school		
			Attending different faith school		
			Attending non-religious school		
			Religious classes, weekend school, summer camps		
		Ethnic and cultural aspects	Jewish community and culture		
			Islamic community and culture		
		Historical and geographical aspects	Historical links		
			Religious locations		
	Influences on community membership and beliefs	Family background	Born into or brought up in the faith, general family background		
			Taught or influenced by parents	Parental influences	
				Parents' religious beliefs and practices	
			Taught or influenced by other relatives		
		Religious education			
		Attending places of worship or groups			
		Religious leaders or teachers			
		Own reading, learning and thinking			
		Friends			
		Other or multiple influences			

1st Level Codes	2nd Level Codes	3rd Level Codes	4th Level Codes	5th Level Codes
What religion or spirituality means to them personally	**Views on religion and spirituality**	Definitions and distinctions	Definitions of religion or religious	
			Definitions of spiritual or spirituality	
			Differences between religion and spirituality	
			Links between religion and spirituality	
		Own sense of being religious or spiritual	Strong sense of spirituality	
			Some sense of spirituality	
			Not religious or spiritual, having doubts	

		Understanding or conceptualization of God	Forms taken by God	Gender-related aspects of God or religion
				Higher, omniscient or omnipresent power; intangible presence
				In human form
				Within people or their interconnectedness
			Perceptions of how God acts	
		What makes sense or what do they like about their religion or community	Sense of community, identity and familiarity	
			Enhanced insights or messages that resonate with them	
			Feeling comforted or calmed	
			Improved life or guiding life choices	
			Pride in being different	
			Historical foundations and links	
			Only partly makes sense to them	
		Impact of religion or spirituality on life choices, values or behavior	Impact on morals or values	
			Impact on behavior or life choices	
		Perceptions and experiences of being different		
		Own teaching or leadership roles relating to religion or spirituality		
	Independent exploration of religion	Extent of freedom or tolerance available to them	Tolerance of parents and family	Presence of tolerance or freedom of belief in family
				Limits on tolerance and freedom of belief in family
			Tolerance and freedom of belief at school	Presence of tolerance or freedom of belief at school
				Limits on tolerance at school
			Tolerance of wider society	
		General interest in learning about religion		
		Personal interpretation and selectivity		
		Questioning, rejection or change of religion		
		Different views or approach from parents		
		Understanding of and views on other religions	All religions are the same or similar	
			What they have adopted from other religions	
			What they dislike or don't understand about other religions	
			Views on own or preferred religion compared with others	
			Other comments on other religions	
		What they don't like or what doesn't	Lack of tolerance or equality	
			Aspects that don't make sense or they don't understand	

		make sense about their religion	Fragmentation, extremism or misinterpretation	
			Don't believe messages or agree with laws	
			Not relevant to life today	
			Other negative comments	
	3. Spiritual evolution or change over time	Spiritual awakening	Experiences of spiritual awakening	
			No spiritual awakening	
		Changes in spirituality over time	Became more spiritual recently or as they matured	
			More spiritual when younger or less busy	
			Spirituality up and down over time	
			Changes triggered by life changes or events	
			No change in spirituality over time	
		How they maintain their spirituality	Prayer, meditation, reading or thinking about God	
			Attending religious services, groups or classes	
			Through support of friends or same-faith community	
	4. Religious and spiritual experiences	Experiences of prayer	Frequency of praying	
			Reasons for praying	
			Methods of praying	
			Feelings when praying or about prayer	
			Never prays	
		Experiences of meditation	Frequency of meditation or how long they have been meditating	
			Meditation methods	
			Feelings when meditating or about meditation	
		Religious observances	Attendance at places of worship	
			Festivals and holidays	
			Rituals and rites of passage	
		Feeling connected to God or community	In nature	
			In places of worship	
			With certain people or communities	
			At specific places	
			When listening to or playing music	
			When praying, meditating, learning about religion, performing rituals	
			Doing sports, dance, drama or other activities	
			When studying, reading or writing	
			At particular times in their lives	
			Everywhere or anywhere	
			When aware of or contemplating higher power or interconnectedness	
		Feeling disconnected from God or community	In certain places	
			Relating to certain experiences, behaviors or states of mind	
			With certain people	
		Negative views and experiences of religion or spirituality	Personal conflicts relating to religion	Examples of conflicts
				No conflicts
			Difficulties of following their faith	Relating to life in the U.S.
				Relating to personal temptations, peer pressure or lack of same-faith community
				Relating to time-constraints
			Destructive or misguided aspects of religion	
			Experiences of discrimination	
			Experiences of religious guilt	
			Negative thoughts or experiences relating being different	

1st Level Codes	2nd Level Codes	3rd Level Codes	4th Level Codes	5th Level Codes
Relationships and Personal Development	**Family relationships**	Nuclear family types and characteristics	Close families	
			Not very close families	
			Divorced or absent parents and blended families	

			Other information on families, or unclear whether close	
		Parent-child relationships	Father-daughter relationships	
			Father-son relationships	
			Mother-daughter relationships	
			Mother-son relationships	
			Relationships with both parents	
		Sibling or cousin relationships		
		Relationships with grandparents, aunts or uncles		
	Relationships with friends	Friendship networks and changes over time		
		Relationships with close friends or romantic partners		
		Friends of same faith		
		Friends of different faiths		
		Broken or discontinued friendships		
		How they spend time with friends	Activities with friends	
			Discussing religion with friends	
		Views of friends and others on their religion		
	4. Support, advice and discussion	Who they turn to for decision-making support	Turn to parents or family	
			Turn to friends	
			Depends on type of decision	
			Turn to God or religion	
			Turn to teachers, mentors or religious leaders	
			Work things out for oneself, or no one to turn to	
		Who they discuss "big issues" with	Family	Discuss big issues with family
				Do not discuss big issues with family
			Friends or schoolmates	Discuss big issues with friends or at school
				Do not discuss big issues with friends or schoolmates
			Other comments	
	Relationships and spiritual growth	Relationships having positive impact on spiritual growth	Family relationships	
			Friends	
			Leaders, teachers and mentors	
			Relationships in general, inspirational people	
			School community	
			Positive impact through negativity	
			No positive impact of relationships on spiritual growth	
		Relationships inhibiting spiritual growth	Examples of relationships that inhibit spiritual growth	
			Relationships have not inhibited spiritual growth	
		Whether and how relationships have changed as their spirituality changed	Changes in relationship	
			No changes in relationships	

1st Level Codes	2nd Level Codes	3rd Level Codes	4th Level Codes	5th Level Codes
D. Personal Beliefs and Sense-Making	**1. Personal values and beliefs**	General values and beliefs		
		Beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life	Whether life is fair	Always or usually fair
				Sometimes fair or fair for some people
				Fair in God's final judgment
				Not fair
			Whether life makes sense	Doesn't make sense, no moments of clarity
				Sometimes makes sense, or to an extent

				Usually or always makes sense
	Life and death	Experiences of death	Experiences of someone close dying	
			Other experiences of death	
			No experiences of death	
		Beliefs about afterlife and reincarnation	Beliefs in afterlife, heaven and hell	
			Don't believe in or unsure about afterlife	
			Beliefs about reincarnation	
			Don't believe in or unsure about reincarnation	
			Beliefs about spirits, ghosts, angels	
	3. Miracles and Coincidences	Miracles	Views on and experiences of miracles	
			Don't believe in miracles	
		Coincidences	Believe in fate, predestination, things happen for a reason	
			Don't believe things happen for a reason, no strange coincidences	
			Believe that people come into life for a reason	
			Don't believe people come into life for a reason	
			Examples of strange coincidences	
			Examples of losing something that turned out for the best	

1st Level Codes	**2nd Level Codes**	**3rd Level Codes**	**4th Level Codes**
Personal Characteristics and Experiences	**Personality and preferences**	Personality type or traits	
		Sources of comfort in times of stress	
	Life experiences or lifestyles	Memorable events	Negative or traumatic memories
			Positive memories
		Experiences of depression or severe stress	
		Immigration to U.S.	
	3. Advice to others		